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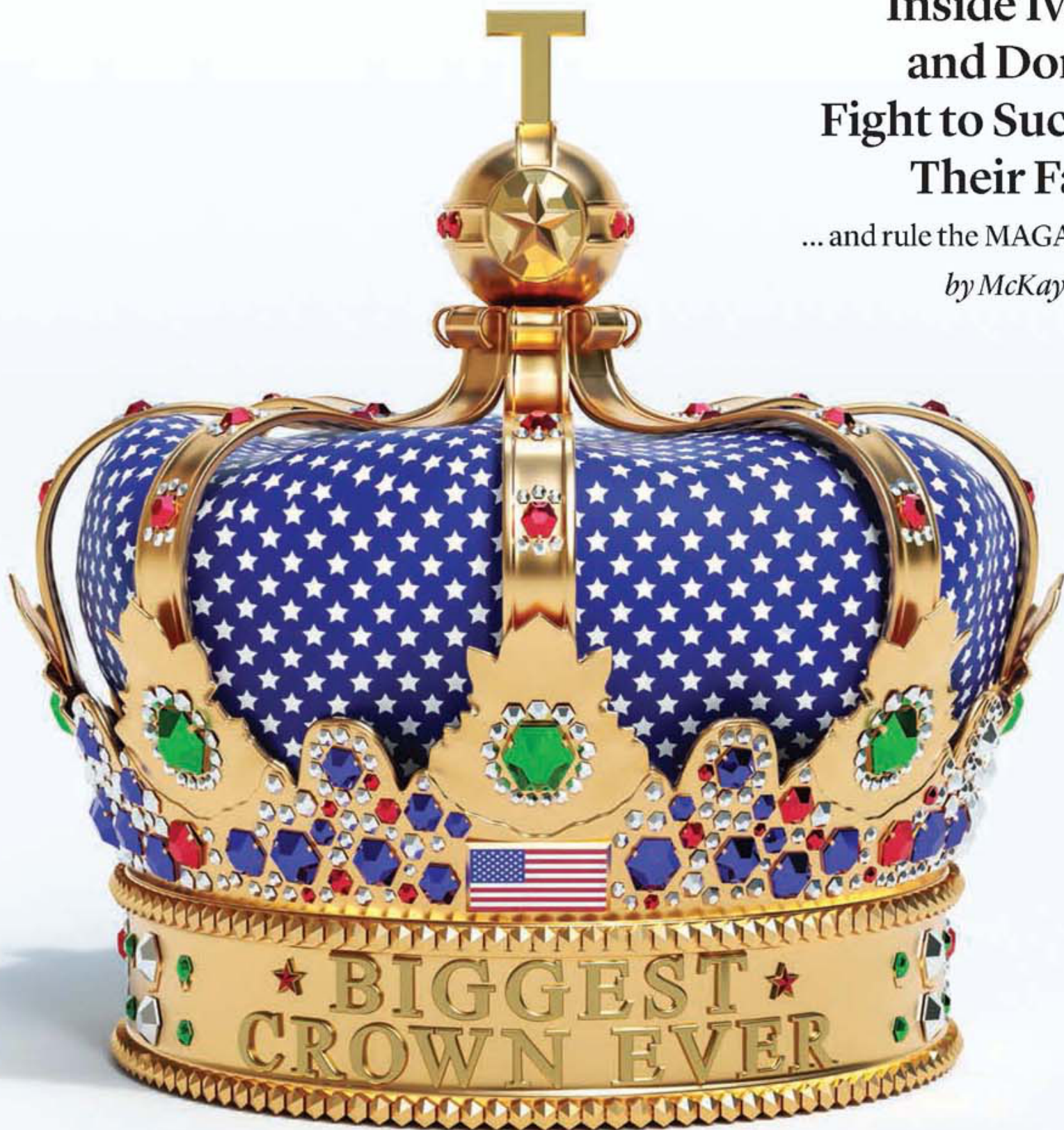
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SIR EDMUND HILLARY AND TENZING NORGAY 1953



TRIESTE EXPEDITION 1960



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DR. SYLVIA EARLE WITH ASPIRING OCEANOGRAPHER



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PERPETUAL PLANET MOUNTAIN INDEX





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THE DEESEA CHALLENGE



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PERPETUAL PLANET

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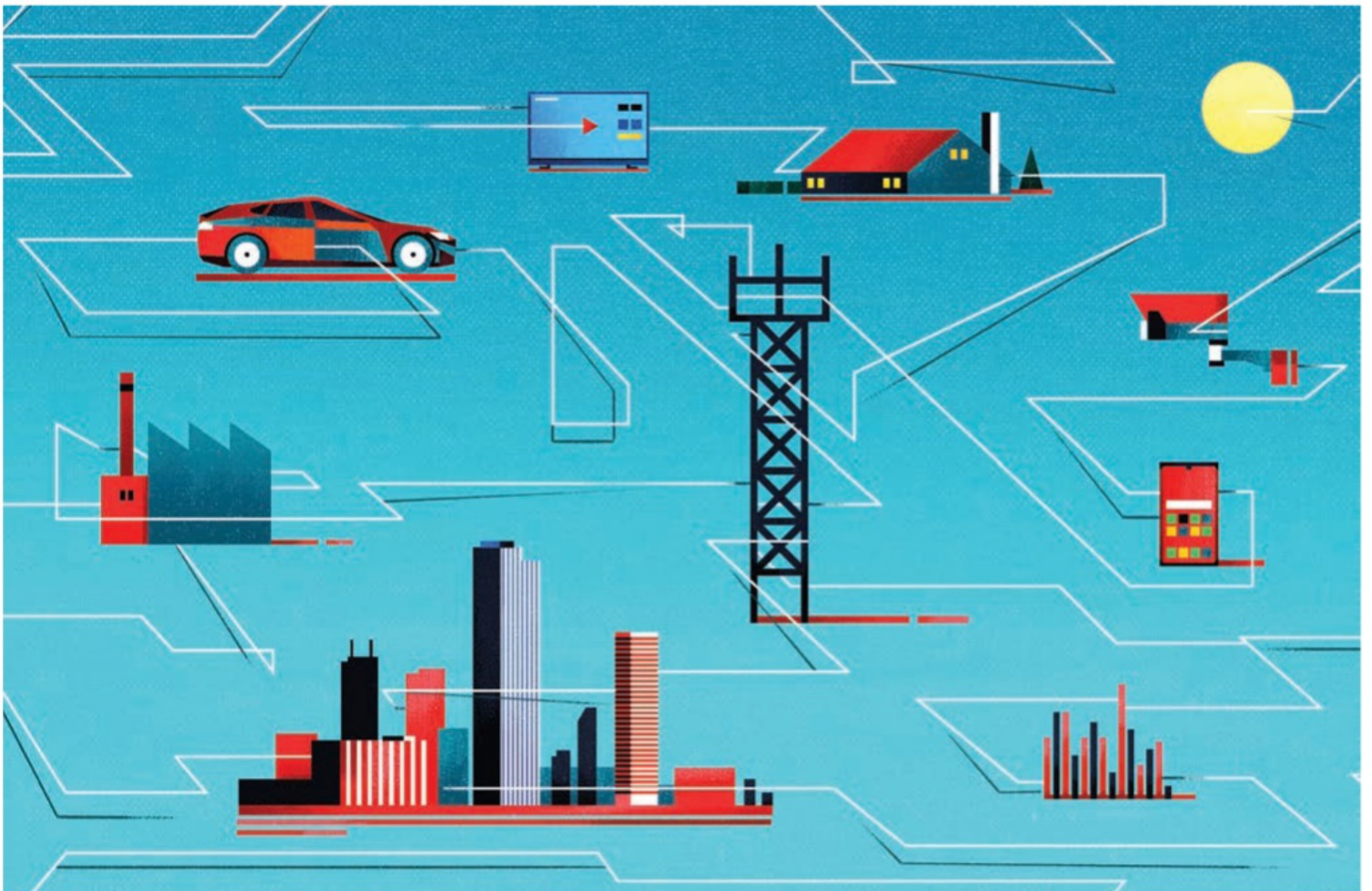
Can 5G Save the Planet?

Climate Change's Unlikely Ally

Illustrations by Dan Matutina

DELIVERING EVERYTHING from speed and security to support for cutting-edge applications like driverless cars, the 5G future promises more. Yet to contribute to global efforts to mitigate climate change, the next generation of wireless networking will need to deliver less in one key area: energy consumption.

Experts estimate that by next year, information and communications technology will account for 3.5 percent of annual global carbon emissions, a larger share than for either the aviation or shipping industry. That figure could jump to 14 percent by 2040, roughly equivalent to the percentage now attributable to the entire population of the United States.



5G could play a significant role in that rise. A world of many more devices—security cameras, smart televisions, connected factory robots—transmitting much more data will require far more power, what the telecom-sustainability expert Anders Andrae calls a potential “perfect storm” of increased energy consumption.

“5G will allow us to modulate our energy use in so many places we’ve overlooked, just because we didn’t have the communications tools to make equipment truly smart.”

—Zach Chang, Carrier-Network Product Manager, Huawei

“5G will be much more powerful than 4G in terms of processing power and bandwidth and has the potential to cover the whole Earth’s population,” says Zach Chang, a carrier-network product manager at Huawei. “All of that will increase energy consumption. If the efficiency of the entire infrastructure doesn’t go up, it won’t make financial or environmental sense. It won’t be sustainable.”

But that’s not a fait accompli. Huawei and others are building 5G networks with energy efficiency in mind, aiming to use less power to transmit more data.

Ultimately, 5G’s most important contribution to energy efficiency may come by enabling connected, sensor-equipped factories, cities, and transportation grids that use advanced analytics and artificial intelligence to optimize and reduce power consumption—cutting costs while putting less CO₂ into the atmosphere. “5G will allow us to modulate our energy use in so many places we’ve overlooked, just because we didn’t have the communications tools to make equipment truly smart,” Chang says. “Our society as a whole can become much more energy efficient.” ///

Learn more at:
www.theatlantic.com/huawei5G

The results have been promising.



KEEPING COOL

The ubiquitous base stations that transmit and receive wireless radio signals currently account for as much as 80 percent of total network energy use; almost half of an individual station's power use is for air-conditioning to cool the equipment. In China, however, Huawei has developed and deployed 5G stations that generate less heat, use sophisticated power-management software, and employ open-air cooling to dramatically reduce electrical consumption—saving an estimated 4,130 kilowatt hours of power per site, per year, which translates to about 1,125 kilograms of carbon emissions.



ON DEMAND

Today’s 4G networks use almost the same amount of energy regardless of how much data they handle. By contrast, 5G will permit reduced power consumption during periods of lower network traffic. “I work in an industrial park,” Chang says. “During the day, lots of people go there to work. They’re checking emails and making lots of phone calls. The nearby base station has to work at peak capacity to process all of that data. But at night, those same people leave. So you don’t need that peak capacity. With 5G, you can lower your power use significantly without sacrificing performance.”



MORE WITH LESS

According to Huawei Chairman Liang Hua, a single kilowatt hour of electricity is sufficient to download about 300 high-definition movies on 4G networks—but on 5G, that same kilowatt hour will power about 5,000 ultra-high-definition movie downloads.

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OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

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When a veteran military man gave me that advice before I left to join U.S. forces in Baghdad, I thought he meant that I needed a way to protect myself from the enemy.





• THE CONVERSATION

The Stock-Buyback Swindle

American corporations are spending trillions of dollars to repurchase their own stock, Jerry Useem reported in August. The practice is enriching CEOs—at the expense of everyone else.

I was an institutional investor in the 1980s and '90s. Share repurchases were a fraud then and they are a fraud now. When companies take cash away from good investment opportunities, it is a sin. When

they use debt to finance share repurchases, it is even worse.

American companies would have a bright future if they put money into innovation and research and development, invested in their workforce

instead of pushing real wages down, and took responsibility for how their business affects the community. It's unfortunate that many companies would not spend a dime to ameliorate the negative impacts they have

on their community—polluting the environment, failing to create jobs while demanding tax breaks, and putting strains on infrastructure.

Future economic historians will look back on this period as one when greed combined with really bad financial engineering led to a decline in America's economic strength.

Nancy Langwiser-Kear
WELLESLEY, MASS.

The way I was taught long ago is that when there are no better uses for a company's excess capital *and* the price of the company's stock is "undervalued," it's okay to repurchase company shares, especially by a company in the mature stage of its product life cycle. Given the rise in stock prices, it's disturbing to see so much stock-buyback activity.

Are opportunities for reinvesting earnings in the future development of a company dwindling?

Rex O'Steen III
GREENVILLE, S.C.

I worked for Equifax for five years and left before the data breach. One year, the company "invested" more than \$500 million, which was roughly one-fifth of its annual revenue, in buybacks. When asked after leaving about the data breach, I always said that one-tenth of the amount invested in buybacks—about \$50 million—would have gone a long way to secure consumer data.

Jean Nickerson
BRAMPTON, ONTARIO

I got my M.B.A. in 1972, and "shareholder value" was the mantra back then. In no way was it an invention of the 1980s. It's tempting to blame the emphasis on shareholder value on Ronald Reagan or modern corporate profit-driven culture, but that's a canard. The phenomenon is really all

about the stock market and short-term results. There isn't anything intrinsically wrong with share buybacks, although they do illustrate that corporations don't have enough internal investment opportunities and certainly didn't need a huge tax reduction like the one passed in 2017, given that they cannot figure out how to profitably invest the money already in their coffers. But that's a different story of greed from the one being told.

Christian Y. Wyser-Pratte
OSSINING, N.Y.

I find no fault with the buyback option. The stated purpose of buybacks is to raise share value, for all shareholders. I care not if executives profit along with every other shareholder. (I care a lot if they profit and the company's share value lags or declines, as was the case with Yahoo.) A reduced share count translates into retained earnings. That can find a home in R&D or facilities planning.

Jerry Useem states that Home Depot employees could have earned an additional \$18,000 a year had buybacks been directed to that end. This raises a question: Are those employees worth that additional income? Rising stock prices lift all boats. Individuals need to get theirs in the water.

Dick Healy
CHICAGO, ILL.

A share repurchase is a simple distribution of profits to a business's owners, in the form of an equity purchase. Partners in partnerships are bought out all the time. Is this a scandal? No, it's just how businesses pay people who invest in them.

To improve management incentives, stop giving away the equity and make managers buy it on the open market, like the rest of us. Then require that they hold it as long as they work for the business. This way they'll have real skin in the game, which means they'll share as much downside risk as upside potential.

Daniel Ferris
VANCOUVER, WASH.

Jerry Useem replies:

Adopting Daniel Ferris's last recommendation—require that executives hold their shares “as long as they work for the business”—would go a long way toward addressing the iniquities of stock buybacks. Because Christian Y. Wyser-Pratte is right: There isn't anything intrinsically wrong with buybacks per se.

The problem is in their usage, which rewards inside shareholders at the expense of outside shareholders and propagates the lack of long-term investment that Nancy Langwiser-Kear rightly warns of. Ban buybacks (a move I'm not proposing), and managers would likely revert to their former habit of using excess cash to acquire unrelated businesses. But at a minimum, regular investors should have an easier way of knowing who is profiting and when. That way they can make an informed decision about whether executives are investing for the long haul—and whether they should too.

DIY Coffins

In August, Rene Chun wrote about New Zealand's newly popular “coffin clubs.”

This article reminded me of my friend Dudley, who made his

own coffin in the '90s. Dudley was a skilled carpenter and carver, so the coffin was really a work of art. My favorite embellishment: along the bottom rail of the coffin were carved the words HANDMADE BY OCCUPANT.

L. W. Bower
ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.



Measles as Metaphor

In August, Peter Beinart showed what the disease's return says about America's ailing culture.

I retired recently after 29 years of training and practice in primary-care pediatrics. I take exception to the notion that pediatricians do not spend time reassuring patients about vaccine safety because reimbursement is inadequate. My colleagues and I routinely stayed past the allotted 15 minutes per patient to explain to parents why their beautiful baby would be vulnerable to meningitis, pneumonia, whooping cough, and severe diarrhea if not immunized. Parents who simply have questions usually are reassured by thoughtful

conversation. However, my experience is consistent with research that has shown that no amount of counseling and accurate information sways parents who are dead-set against immunizations. These encounters are deeply distressing for pediatricians, because prevention is at the heart of our mission, and we value the trust of parents more than any compensation.

True empowerment of physicians would include reinforcement by government, schools, and child-care facilities through exclusion policies of children unvaccinated for diseases that are contagious (in the absence of a medical contraindication). Insurance companies could increase premiums for families that willingly choose not to vaccinate, to reflect a higher-risk category. If greater society does not value the public-health role of vaccines, parents suspect that doctors push them for profit.

Elise Thomas, M.D.
YORK, PA.

Corrections

“The Stock-Buyback Swindle” (August) stated that Craig Menear, the chairman and CEO of Home Depot, sold 113,687 shares of his company's stock the same day as a conference call with investors. He sold the shares the next day.

Due to an editing error, “What Happened to Aung San Suu Kyi?” (September) indicated that Wai Wai Nu is a man. In fact, Wai Wai Nu is a woman. We regret the error.

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As an FBI press release put it in 2016, “If there is such a thing as an ideal profession for a serial killer, it may well be as a long-haul truck driver.”
— Rene Chun, p. 30



DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

OCTOBER 2019

• SPORTS

WHY BLACK ATHLETES SHOULD LEAVE WHITE COLLEGES

... and tear down the NCAA as we know it

BY JEMELE HILL

IN THE SUMMER of 2018 Kayvon Thibodeaux, who was then ranked as the top high-school football player in America, visited Florida A&M University, in Tallahassee. When a player of Thibodeaux's caliber visits a perennial football power—say, Alabama—it's called Wednesday. But when he visits a historically black college or university (HBCU) like Florida A&M, it threatens to crack the foundation on which the money-making edifice of college sports rests.

PHOTO RENDERING BY PATRICK WHITE



"I really just wanted to learn the history of FAMU," Thibodeaux, a defensive end who received a scholarship offer from the school after his freshman year in high school, told me. "And I wanted to show there were more opportunities out there than just big-time Division I schools."

Ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, Thibodeaux announced that he was going to one of the top football programs in the country, the University of Oregon. "Nobody wants to eat McDonald's when you can get filet mignon" is how Thibodeaux put it. But over the course of the five months between his visit to FAMU and his decision to enroll at Oregon, Thibodeaux—who gushed about the historically black university on social media—galvanized alumni and boosted national awareness of the institution. It was a moment of hope for HBCUs, and it should have been a moment of fear for the predominantly white institutions whose collective multibillion-dollar revenues have been built largely on the exertions of (uncompensated) black athletes.

The NCAA reported \$1.1 billion in revenue for its 2017 fiscal year. Most of that money comes from the Division I men's-basketball tournament. In 2016, the NCAA extended its television agreement with CBS Sports and Turner Broadcasting through 2032—an \$8.8 billion deal. About 30 Division I schools each bring in at least \$100 million in athletic revenue every year. Almost all of these schools are majority white—in fact, black men make up only 2.4 percent of the total undergraduate population of the 65 schools in the so-called Power Five athletic conferences. Yet black men make up 55 percent of the football players in those conferences, and 56 percent of basketball players.

Black athletes have attracted money and attention to the predominantly white universities that showcase them. Meanwhile, black colleges are struggling. Alabama's athletic department generated \$174 million in the 2016–17 school year, whereas the HBCU that generated the most money from athletics that year, Prairie View A&M, brought in less than \$18 million. Beyond sports, the average HBCU endowment is only one-eighth that of the average predominantly white school; taken together, all of the HBCU endowments combined make up less than a tenth of Harvard's.

Why should this matter to anyone beyond the administrators and alumni of the HBCUs themselves? Because black colleges play an important role in the creation and propagation of a black professional class. Despite constituting only 3 percent of four-year colleges in the country, HBCUs have produced 80 percent of the black judges, 50 percent of the black lawyers, 50 percent of the black doctors, 40 percent of the black engineers, 40 percent of the black members of Congress, and 13 percent of the black CEOs in America today. (They have also produced this election cycle's only black female candidate for the U.S. presidency: Kamala Harris is a 1986 graduate of Howard University.)

In a country where the racial wealth gap remains enormous—the median white household has nearly 10 times the wealth of the median black household, and the rate of white homeownership is about 70 percent higher than that of black homeownership—institutions that nurture a black middle class are crucial. And when these institutions are healthy, they bring economic development to the black neighborhoods that surround them.

Moreover, some black students feel safer, both physically and emotionally, on an HBCU campus—all the more so as racial tensions have risen in recent years. Navigating a predominantly white campus as a black student can feel isolating, even for athletes. Davon Dillard is a basketball player who transferred to Shaw University after Oklahoma State dismissed him for disciplinary reasons. "Going to a school where most of the people are the same color as you, it's almost like you can let your guard down a little bit," he told me. "You don't have to pretend to be somebody else. You don't have to dress this way, or do things this way. It's like, 'I know you. We have the same kind of struggles. We can relate.' It's almost like you're back at home in your neighborhood." Perhaps partly for this reason, black students' graduation rates at HBCUs are notably higher than black students' at other colleges when controlling for factors such as income and high-school success.

Top black athletes used to go to black colleges. In fact, until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in 1954, Jim Crow and segregation made black colleges pretty much the only destination for black athletes. Even into the 1970s and '80s, some HBCU alums were achieving Hall of Fame-level greatness in basketball (Willis Reed, Grambling State '64; Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, Winston-Salem State '67) and football (Walter Payton, Jackson State '75; Jerry Rice, Mississippi Valley State '84). But the reason black athletes today don't choose FAMU over Oregon, or Hampton over Duke, is obvious: Their chances of making it to the pros as a high draft pick, and of winning lucrative endorsement deals, are enhanced by going to the predominantly white schools that sit atop the college-sports world. Even for the majority of players, whose prospects of a professional sports career are remote, the lure of playing in championships—in giant stadiums with luxurious training facilities, in front of millions of television viewers—is strong. Clemson is only 6 percent black, but it's won two of the past three national foot-

The entire endowment of North Carolina A&T is worth barely as much as Clemson's football campus.

ball championships and has a \$55 million football complex. North Carolina A&T, a few hours north, is 78 percent black. And while the Aggies have won the HBCU national championship in three of the past four seasons, the program can't offer what Clemson can in terms of resources and exposure; A&T's entire endowment is worth barely as much as Clemson's football complex. Presented with a choice between Clemson and North Carolina A&T, most high-school athletes would choose Clemson—whose starting lineup, not incidentally, is majority black.

But what if a group of elite athletes collectively made the choice to attend HBCUs?

Black athletes overall have never had as much power and influence as they do

now. While NCAA rules prevent them from making money off their own labor at the college level, they are essential to the massive amount of revenue generated by college football and basketball. This gives them leverage, if only they could be moved to use it.

“I have a hard time saying this,” LeVelle Moton, the head basketball coach at North Carolina Central, an HBCU that has won three consecutive Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference titles, told me. “Black people, I love us, but everyone else understands that we’re the culture, except for us.” Audiences and money “are going to come wherever the product is. We don’t understand that, and we continue to give ourselves away for free.”

SOME PEOPLE POINT to September 12, 1970, as the day HBCUs lost their corner on the nation’s best black football talent. That’s the day an all-white Alabama team got their asses handed to them by the University of Southern California’s heralded African American triumvirate of quarterback Jimmy Jones and running backs Sam “Bam” Cunningham and Clarence Davis. After that, football programs in the Deep South realized that if they were going to stay competitive, they would have to recruit black players. (In other areas of the country, colleges had already begun to recruit African Americans: The Michigan State team that fought Notre Dame to a 10–10 draw in the fall of 1966—a contest that many still consider to be the best college football game of all time—had 20 black players.)

In the era before big television contracts, HBCUs more or less had a monopoly on black athletes, because there was little money to be made from them. But when college sports became big business, the major sports schools proved to be relentless in recruiting players away from HBCUs. William C. Rhoden, the author of *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, an account of how black athletes have historically commanded big audiences but had little true power, places some of the blame for the exodus on the HBCUs themselves, which operated as if they would have a monopoly on black talent forever. “The HBCUs probably felt that racism was so deeply entrenched that white people would never go after black kids en masse,” Rhoden told me recently. “Had HBCUs known then what



Kayvon Thibodeaux (left) made news when he visited Florida A&M University, an HBCU—but he ultimately decided to attend the University of Oregon. Davon Dillard (right), a basketball player at Shaw University, says that being at an HBCU is “almost like you’re back at home in your neighborhood.”

we all know now, maybe they could have figured out a way to say, ‘How can we, with the window we’ve got left, make a great product, so when white people finally get religion, we’ll still be in a good position?’”

The flight of black athletes to majority-white colleges has been devastating to HBCUs. Consider Grambling State, in Louisiana, home of arguably the most storied football program in HBCU history. A 57 percent decrease in state funding over a period of several years had made it difficult for Grambling to maintain its football facilities. In 2013, things got so bad that players—fed up with the school’s dilapidated facilities and the long bus trips to road games, as well as the firing of the coach—staged a boycott that led to them forfeiting a game. Though the walkout prompted Grambling to spend \$30,000 on a new weight room, and it has since raised nearly \$2 million for upgrades to its Eddie Robinson Stadium, the ordeal was embarrassing for the university.

Today, most blue-chip recruits in football or basketball don’t even consider attending black colleges. This has forced HBCUs to become proficient at identifying and developing diamonds in the

rough—prospects who were passed over or jettisoned by bigger programs. “These are guys who were thought to be not big enough or not fast enough,” Buddy Pough, the head football coach at South Carolina State, told me. “Our niche has been that we take the guy that nobody seems to want.”

To attract the best football and basketball players in the nation, HBCUs have to spend money to improve their facilities—but to generate the athletic revenue necessary to improve their facilities, the colleges need more of the best players.

“We really have to get monetary support in upgrading facilities,” LeVelle Moton told me. “These kids want to know: What does this weight room look like? What does this athletic facility look like? What does this practice facility look like? It’s tough to compete.”

Kayvon Thibodeaux said much the same. “In this day and age, it’s about money,” he told me. “Unless HBCUs upgrade drastically, I don’t know if things will change.”

BUT WHAT IF young black athletes were to force that change?

“NCAA athletics generate billions in profit annually, and Black athletes are the prized workforce,” reads the mission

statement of an organization called the Power Moves Initiative. “However, African Americans are not stakeholders at predominantly white universities and corporations that profit from our talent. The system must be disrupted to redirect the stream of wealth.”

Robert Buck, who attended two black colleges (Alabama State and FAMU), got the idea to start the Power Moves Initiative after organizing the 5th Quarter Classic, a now-defunct annual game between HBCUs held in Mobile, Alabama. He saw how the black colleges featured in the classic were generating millions for Mobile, a city that is 50.4 percent black. It bothered Buck that other black athletes were generating such money for predominantly white schools, and that other black communities weren’t receiving the same benefits.

“It’s almost like we were being used,” Buck told me.

He is convinced that steering high-school athletes of color toward HBCUs can help invigorate African American communities and generate black success. “I think we have an inferiority complex,” he said. “We, as black people, don’t feel like something is as large or as good if a white person isn’t in charge of it ... We’re the value. That value doesn’t diminish because you’re doing it with your own.”

There’s a model for how young black athletes could leverage their talent and

financial power. In the early 1990s, five high-school basketball players—two each from Texas and Detroit, and one from Chicago—got to know one another playing in all-star games and basketball camps. They enrolled together at the University of Michigan, and partway through their first season they were all starting for the team.

Becoming famous as the Fab Five, they reached the championship game of the March Madness tournament in 1992 and 1993, and four of them went on to play in the NBA. What if instead of enrolling at Michigan they’d gone to Howard, taking the Bison, rather than the Wolverines, to the Final Four?

A single high-profile recruit enrolling at an HBCU would get people’s attention. (Thibodeaux got people’s attention just by *considering* enrolling.) Three or four of them could spark a national conversation—and, in basketball, could generate a championship run that attracted fans and money. Now imagine five or 10 or 20—or a few dozen. That could quickly propel a few black schools into the athletic empyrean, and change the place of HBCUs in American culture.

It wouldn’t be that hard. Many of the top high-school players, especially in

basketball, know one another from Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) tournaments and all-star games, as the Fab Five did. If a few of them got together at HBCUs, they could redraw the landscape of college basketball.

“If we created a Fab Five at Alabama State,” Buck told me, “that would create a

A single high-profile recruit enrolling at an HBCU would get people’s attention.

lot of hype around our HBCUs, showing the value that we already possess and redirecting a whole lot of dollars to black colleges.”

Bringing elite athletic talent back to black colleges would have potent downstream effects. It would boost HBCU revenues and endowments; stimulate the economy of the black communities in which many of these schools are embedded; amplify the power of black coaches, who are often excluded from prominent positions at predominantly white institutions; and bring the benefits of black labor back to black people. In the general culture, prominent figures such as Beyoncé, LeBron James, and the recently slain rapper Nipsey Hussle have argued that African Americans should be using their talents not just to enrich themselves but to help strengthen and empower black communities. “Gentrify your own hood before these people do it,” Jay-Z rapped at the concert that reopened Webster Hall in New York City in April. “Claim eminent domain and have your people move in.”

If promising black student athletes chose to attend HBCUs in greater numbers, they would, at a minimum, bring some welcome attention and money to beleaguered black colleges, which invested in black people when there was no athletic profit to reap. More revolutionarily, perhaps they could disrupt the reign of an “amateur” sports system that uses the labor of black folks to make white folks rich. **A**

Jemele Hill is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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• SKETCH

SHE DOESN'T BELIEVE ALL WOMEN

Juanita Broaddrick, who alleges that Bill Clinton raped her in 1978, has found new life as a Trump defender.

BY AMANDA FITZSIMONS



ON THE AFTERNOON of July 3, the day before President Donald Trump's rained-on Independence Day celebration (or "show of a lifetime," depending on whose Twitter feed you look at), a small but committed group left a wharf in Washington, D.C., for a cruise on the Potomac.

In 2016, we learned that the Trump coalition was broader than many had assumed: the hold-your-nose-vote-your-pocketbook one-percenters; the suburban soccer moms who, when it came down to it, were a little skittish about immigration. But the 200-some-odd passengers aboard the Spirit of Washington were emphatically not those people—this was a Trump-campaign-rally crowd in full flower. Women carried evening clutches with MAGA spelled in rhinestones; one guest was literally wrapped in the flag, the stars portion knotted at her neck, the rest wafting in the waterfront breeze like Superman's cape. There were "Bikers for Trump," "Cowboys for Trump," a woman peddling 24-karat-gold-plated

Trump-hologram novelty bills for \$30 (proceeds, she explained, would go to defeating Representative Ilhan Omar).

And yet the woman of the hour, the person with whom just about everyone wanted to take a selfie, was a 76-year-old grandmother named Juanita with a heart-shaped face and a cascade of blond curls wrangled into a ponytail; on her navy sheath, she wore a TRUMP 2020 pin no bigger than American Airlines wings. Before she even reached the check-in desk at the pier, she was approached for a picture by a statuesque woman in her early 30s wearing a sundress and a MAGA hat. "I know you from Fox News," the woman said. Another woman told her, "I just love your Twitter—I have it open on my phone right now." A man who said he was running for Congress against California's Adam Schiff made sure they swapped contact info—it was clear he wanted her endorsement. Throughout the three-hour trip, she was polished and patient and gracious. At the same time, she seemed a little uncomfortable with all the fuss. When we were back on dry land, I asked how many people she thought had wanted to take a selfie with her, and she looked embarrassed. "Oh, no more than 30," she said, undoubtedly undercounting her fans.

OUTSIDE OF TRUMP'S BASE, the name Juanita Broaddrick may stir only muddled memories—wasn't she one of the women not named Monica Lewinsky who accused Bill Clinton of something? Paula Jones, Kathleen Willey, Gennifer Flowers—their stories can blur, but each of these women has a distinct set of allegations, and Broaddrick's are the most serious. She says Clinton raped her in 1978, when he was the attorney general of Arkansas and she was a volunteer for his gubernatorial campaign. She did not report the alleged crime to the police; in fact, Broaddrick's name wasn't made public until two decades later, via a 1998 court filing in the Paula Jones case. (Clinton denied the allegations.) Even though Broaddrick did some press—once she'd been outed, she wanted the chance to share her perspective—the story didn't stick to the Clinton legacy the way Lewinsky's has. At the time, her claims were mostly ignored, and when acknowledged they were often disparaged; the fact that she'd recanted in an affidavit after being subpoenaed by Jones's lawyers was a favorite data point of critics. (Broaddrick says she denied that anything had happened with Clinton because she didn't want to get involved in a big legal circus with Jones.)

But the worst part of the aftermath had already happened by then, Broaddrick told me. Clinton had been the leader of the free world for five long years. "Just seeing him on TV, it was constant. I don't know who got to be the quickest, my husband or me,

The gulf between Broaddrick's social-media persona and her actual one is especially wide.

switching the channel," she said. She even ended up going to an earlier church service, because at her usual one the priest had taken to asking congregants to pray for the president. "I had to sit in church, down on my knees, and be told that I am to pray for Bill Clinton."

By the early aughts, she'd faded into relative obscurity and basically moved

on with her life. Then Hillary Clinton ran for president, and her pronounced pro-woman agenda stirred up decades-old resentment. “I kept thinking, *Why can’t you see this huge elephant in the room?*” Broadrick recalled. “*Why can’t you see this woman for what she really is?*” One day, Broadrick decided she had to weigh in. Though she’d tweeted only three times before the 2016 election cycle, she sent out a statement that went viral: “I was 35 years old when Bill Clinton, Ark. Attorney General raped me. I am now 73 ... it never goes away.” Nine months later, the Trump campaign issued what would be a fateful invitation: Would she sit in the audience during the candidate’s second debate with Hillary Clinton?

Since that October evening, Broadrick has popped up semi-regularly on Fox News and become something of a MAGA thought leader, with 133,000 followers on Twitter, where her commentary ranges from insults (like calling Representative Schiff “Schiff for Brains”) to borderline

hate speech (retweeting a picture of the short-haired soccer star Megan Rapinoe and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez captioned “Boy Meets Girl”). She travels the country speaking to conservative groups and signing copies of her self-published memoir, *You’d Better Put Some Ice on That* (so named for the last thing Broadrick says Clinton uttered before leaving the scene of the alleged assault, in which he bit her lip so violently that he drew blood).

Twitter augments the snarkier side of almost everyone’s personality, but the gulf between Broadrick’s social-media persona and her actual one is especially wide. In the days after Broadrick denigrated E. Jean Carroll, the woman who accused Trump of rape in her new book, tweeting that she looked like the *Jeopardy* host Alex Trebek, I called her to request an interview. To hear Broadrick’s genial, alto drawl was jarring, as was the contrast between the vitriolic @atensnut (Broadrick is a huge tennis fan) and

the woman who later greeted me with a bear hug when we met in the lobby of a Days Inn near her home. I’d mentioned on the phone that I’d forgotten my toothbrush, and, though it was a Sunday morning, she’d come over to transport me to the nearest drugstore. She hadn’t been planning on church that day anyway, she assured me. Even the story of how she’d launched her Twitter activism—her grandson had helped; she’d barely known how the thing worked—was endearing.

Toothbrush secured, Broadrick took me on a tour of the place where she’s spent almost her whole life, Fort Smith and neighboring Van Buren. Fort Smith has the second-largest population in the state, after Little Rock, though it’s by no means a metropolis. The downtown’s stately, wide boulevards and meticulously preserved antebellum architecture are its main selling points. The city is so quintessentially old South that it served as a location for *The Blue and the Gray*, a 1980s miniseries about the Civil War starring Stacy Keach.

Most interesting were Broadrick’s personal landmarks. She pointed out the spot where her parents—both white southerners, despite what her first name might suggest—used to own a dry cleaner. The place where a tomboyish Juanita broke her arm at 8 years old while visiting a classmate’s horse farm (now a Walmart—welcome to Arkansas). The movie theater where 4-year-old Juanita and her 6-year-old sister, Patsy, would take the bus to watch spaghetti Westerns while their parents spent 12-hour days pressing suits—life was different back then, or her mother and father were really irresponsible; she’s undecided. The sprawling 40-acre property where she’d lived with her second husband, a cowboy who lassoed cattle in their backyard, and then by herself after the two divorced in 2003. (She downsized only last year, moving to a two-bedroom condo in a nearby gated community.) The law offices of her only child, Kevin, whom she adopted when he was two days old. The high school where she attends every home football game to watch Kevin’s boy, her 16-year-old grandson, play fullback.

Broadrick was most animated, however, when we stopped at a nursing home she’d run that had won awards for outstanding patient care and at a facility for children with severe disabilities she’d owned and operated before retiring in 2008. In fact, she said, the whole



reason she met Bill Clinton on the day of the alleged attack was to ask for his help in procuring more funds for needy long-term-care patients.

For most of her life, Broaddrick said, she was politically independent: Clinton's race for governor was the first time she ever showed the slightest interest in politics, and she only got involved because a friend in her women's league talked her into it. She voted for George W. Bush twice but threw in with Barack Obama in 2008, and even gave \$3,000 to his campaign, she said. At first she wasn't sold on Trump: "I did not know what to make of this man." Then, in May 2016, she watched an episode of *Hannity* in which Trump used the word *rape* to describe Broaddrick's claim—it was a word she'd avoided. "I almost fell out of my chair. That's when I was firmly in his corner," she told me. "It was personal." She felt vindicated, believed. Around this time, she also started gravitating toward Trump's policies. She liked the border wall and his ideas for stimulating the economy, and she appreciated that this man seemed to be sacrificing a comfortable life to make America ... "better," she said.

When the campaign called, the day after the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape was released, to ask if she could fly to St. Louis for the debate, she went to Kevin for advice. "He told me, 'Don't do it, Mom—they're just using you.'" But she told her son that she didn't much mind being used if that meant underlining the hypocrisy of Hillary Clinton: How could she, of all people, express outrage about the tape? "The Republicans use the Clinton victims the same way the liberal media uses the victims—the *supposed* victims—of Mr. Trump and [Supreme Court Justice Brett] Kavanaugh," Broaddrick said. "It's truly politics." She does have her limits, though. When she got wind that campaign operatives were angling to seat her within spitting distance of Bill Clinton at the debate in hopes of provoking a confrontation, she was horrified. "I would have walked out if that had happened," she told me.

After the election, an unlikely turn of events: Broaddrick received something of a collective mea culpa from the left. MSNBC's Chris Hayes tweeted that Democrats were "overdue for a real reckoning with the allegations against Clinton"; the *New York Times* columnist Michelle

Goldberg published an op-ed headlined "I Believe Juanita"; and *The Washington Post*'s Richard Cohen wrote that he regretted dismissing Broaddrick's plausible charges for so long. The proximate cause of the reassessment was #MeToo; the immediate one, at least for Cohen, was an interview Broaddrick did last fall for *Slow Burn*, Leon Neyfakh's blockbuster podcast about Clinton's impeachment. Some combination of the episode's timing (on the heels of Kavanaugh's Senate testimony) and Broaddrick's beat-by-beat retelling of her interaction with Clinton—"He grabs me and that's when things turned really

bad"—upended people's assumptions. "Gruesome" is how Neyfakh described the interview when we spoke on the phone.

Broaddrick is grateful for her newfound backing from bold-faced liberal names, but also wary of it, mostly because the #MeToo movement itself hasn't exactly welcomed her. In 2017, Broaddrick was approached by *Time* magazine about participating in what would turn out to be its Person of the Year issue celebrating sexual-harassment whistle-blowers, and though she submitted a blurb in support of #MeToo, it ended up on the cutting-room floor. (A spokesperson for *Time* said

• ANIMAL KINGDOM

Going Deep

Why whales have dropped their vocal pitch

BY REBECCA GIGGS

IN ANY environment more secluded from our imagination than the seas surrounding Antarctica? Icebergs grind above a seabed dotted with salps, sea squirts, sponges, and other barely animate organisms. The sun scarcely rises for half the year. Under the elemental conditions at these latitudes, Antarctic blue whales exist in a world defined by bioacoustics. Blue whales, Earth's largest animals, call to others of their kind, though exactly what these cries communicate remains a mystery. Whether to attract a mate, to repel a rival, or for some other social purpose, the sounds blue whales make are less song, more drone—a tectonic rumble on the furthest edge of human

hearing. That the sounds of blue whales seem simple might suggest they are unchanging across generations. But these atonal sounds have begun evolving. Since at least the 1960s, their pitch has downshifted the equivalent of three white keys on a piano. Scientists have theories as to why—some worrisome, some hopeful, all involving humans.

The deepening of Antarctic blue whales' sounds is not unique to the subspecies. Groups of pygmy blue whales found near Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Australia, as well as fin whales, which live in seas around the world, have also dropped their pitch. (Even before this change, fin whales emitted sounds so low as to be nearly imperceptible to

humans; the wavelengths of their calls were often longer than the bodies of the whales themselves.) In a study last year that analyzed more than 1 million individual recordings of whale calls, scale shifts were found across species, and among populations that don't necessarily interact with one another. Which is to say, whatever has triggered the change doesn't seem to have a specific geographic origin.

The underwater clamor caused by maritime traffic and extractive industries might seem a likely culprit. After all, such noise is known to interrupt whales' foraging and interfere with their vocal interactions. But although some whales do adapt, in limited ways, to artificial sounds in the ocean—by pausing their calls to avoid competing with the passage of cargo ships, for example—scientists don't believe that the deepening whale calls are a response to sonic pollution. They have identified lowered pitches even across populations of whales that live in seas without major shipping routes, where mechanical noise is negligible.

that editors reached out to dozens of people for possible inclusion and that Broadrick was one of many who didn't make it, but Broadrick views the omission as a personal snub: "#MeToo wants nothing to do with me.") In April 2018, when the movement's founder, Tarana Burke, was confronted, during a presentation, about whether she believed Broadrick, she hedged—more evidence to Broadrick that she was being shunned by the #MeToo universe.

The veracity of her story continues to be called into question, even by a handful of people on the right. About a week

before we met, George Conway, the relentless Trump critic and husband of White House counselor Kellyanne Conway, argued in *The Washington Post* that, if anything, E. Jean Carroll was at least as credible as Broadrick, since the latter had once recanted. (As an informal adviser to Paula Jones, Conway had had a front-row seat for the flip-flop.)

The evolving opinion about Broadrick's claim hasn't inspired her to temper her support for Trump. Part and parcel of that is her unwillingness to trust the word of a single one of the more than 15 women who have accused the president of sexual

misconduct. (Trump has denied the allegations.) "They need to be investigated," she likes to say.

Her determination to stand by her man is especially surprising when it comes to Carroll, because the two women's stories are eerily parallel: Both women say they were tricked into being alone with the men. Both Carroll and Broadrick told friends at the time of the incident, and these friends have corroborated their accounts. Both allegations surfaced decades after the fact. Both women said they were raped, as opposed to sexually harassed or groped like the other accusers of Clinton and Trump.

Broadrick told me she thinks Carroll just wanted attention. Carroll also acted strangely during an appearance on CNN, Broadrick said. "I'm sure she knows he's gay, but it was like she was putting the make on Anderson Cooper." Ultimately, Broadrick said, her skepticism comes down to her gut—not just her feelings about Carroll but about all the women who have accused the president of sexual improprieties. "When you've been raped, you have a persona about you—it's almost like you can sense it. I don't have ESP, but you can almost feel their feelings if these things really happened to them."

She knows a rape victim when she sees one. It's hard to believe someone who has been so wounded by having her own rape case rejected (not to mention a person who has worked with abused children) would so blithely dispense with women who make similar claims.

Neyfakh has a theory about Broadrick's all-in attitude toward Trump: "She's found a willing audience in conservative media. She believes what she needs to believe." In other words, he said, "she's a partisan hack, like the rest of us."

Yes, and maybe she's also embittered that the women now coming forward have been taken more seriously than she was—than she still is, in some quarters. For all the heightened awareness of sexual assault, we are, of course, a polarized nation. It is at once astonishing and predictable that many of us look at an individual and see only her tribe—even those of us with the most cause to avoid that kind of reductive thinking. **A**

Amanda FitzSimons is a Brooklyn-based writer.

Another possible explanation for the change in whale calls is the achievements of global conservation efforts. At the start of the 20th century, an estimated 239,000 Antarctic blue whales occupied the Southern Ocean. By the early 1970s, decades of commercial whaling—initially by Norwegian and British whalers, and later by illegal Soviet fleets—had decreased the blue-whale population in the region to a mere 360. But since protection of the subspecies began in 1966, that number has begun to rebound. Scientists

have speculated that the whale's anatomy determines that the louder it gets, the higher the pitch of its calls. As populations have grown, then, the whales may have decreased their volume because they are more likely to be communicating over short distances. In other words, Antarctic blue whales may be lower-toned today than in previous decades simply because they no longer need to shout.

Last year's study of whale calls also suggests a more ominous reason for the drop in pitch, however: Perhaps

whales don't need to be so loud because sound waves travel farther in oceans made acidic by the absorption of carbon dioxide.

Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, meanwhile, may indirectly influence whale voices in other ways. Recent monitoring of Antarctic blue whales shows that, during the austral summer, their pitch rises. Researchers have hypothesized that in warmer months, the whales must use their forte volume to be heard amid the cracking ice—a natural sound amplified by unnatural processes, as rising temperatures exacerbate ice-melt. So the impacts of a warming planet may modulate animal sounds even in remote places with barely any humans, and where the most thunderous notes come not from ships, but from the clatter of breaking ice.

We may not yet know what the sounds of blue whales mean. But whether through our intent to preserve these creatures, or as a result of refashioning their environment, our deeds echo in their voices. **A**





• CITIES

IN THE FALL OF ROME, GOOD NEWS FOR AMERICA

Why the decline of the federal government
might not be such a bad thing

BY JAMES FALLOWS

IT'S TIME TO think about the Roman empire again. But not the part of its history that usually commands attention in the United States: the long, sad path of Decline and Fall. It's what happened later that deserves our curiosity.

As a reminder, in 476 A.D., a barbarian general named Odoacer overthrew

the legitimate emperor of the Western empire, Romulus Augustulus, who thus became the last of the emperors to rule from Italy.

The Eastern empire, ruled from Constantinople, chugged along for many more centuries. But the Roman progression—from republic to empire to

ruin—has played an outsized role in tragic imagination about the United States. If a civilization could descend from Cicero and Cato to Caligula and Nero in scarcely a century, how long could the brave experiment launched by Madison, Jefferson, and company hope to endure?

The era that began with Rome's collapse—"late antiquity," as scholars call it—holds a hazier place in America's imagination and makes only rare cameo appearances in speeches or essays about the national prospect. Before, we have the familiar characters in togas; sometime after, knights in armor. But in between? And specifically: How did the diverse terrain that had been the Roman empire in the West respond when central authority gave way? When the last emperor was gone, how did that register in Hispania and Gaul? How did people manage without the imperial system that had built roads and aqueducts, and brought its laws and language to so much of the world?

The historians' view appears to be that they managed surprisingly well. "It is only too easy to write about the Late Antique world as if it were merely a melancholy tale," Peter Brown, of Princeton, wrote in his influential 1971 book, *The World of Late Antiquity*. But, he continued, "we are increasingly aware of the astounding new beginnings associated with this period." These included not only the breakup of empire into the precursors of what became modern countries but also "much that a sensitive European has come to regard as most 'modern' and valuable in his own culture," from new artistic and literary forms to self-governing civic associations.

In his new book, *Escape From Rome*, Walter Scheidel, of Stanford, goes further, arguing that "the Roman empire made modern development possible by going away and never coming back." His case, in boiled-down form, is that the removal of centralized control opened the way to a sustained era of creativity at the duchy-by-duchy and monastery-by-monastery level, which in turn led to broad cultural advancement and eventual prosperity. The dawn of the university and private business organizations; the idea of personal rights and freedoms—on these and other fronts, what had been Roman territories moved forward as imperial control disappeared. "From this developmental

perspective, the death of the Roman empire had a much greater impact than its prior existence,” Scheidel writes. He quotes Edward Gibbon’s famous judgment that Rome’s fall was “the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene, in the history of mankind”—but disagrees with the “awful” part.

Might the travails of today’s American governing system, and the strains on the empire-without-the-name it has tried to run since World War II, have a similar, perversely beneficial effect? Could the self-paralysis of American national governance somehow usher in a rebirth—our own Dark Ages, but in a good way?

NATURALLY MY HOPE as an American is that the national government starts working better. And what I’ve learned from living through crisis cycles from the 1960s onward, plus studying those of the more distant past, is to always allow for the rebound capacity of this continually changing culture.

But what if faith in American resilience is now misplaced? What if it really is different this time? I’ve been asking historians, politicians, businesspeople, and civic leaders to imagine 21st-century America the way historians like Brown and Scheidel imagine late antiquity. How will things look for us, duchy by duchy and monastery by monastery, if the national government has broken in a way that can’t be fixed?

Governmental “failure” comes down to an inability to match a society’s resources to its biggest opportunities and needs. This is the clearest standard by which current U.S. national governance fails. In principle, almost nothing is beyond America’s capacities. In practice, almost every big task seems too hard.

Yet for our own era’s counterparts to duchies and monasteries—for state and local governments, and for certain large private organizations, including universities and some companies—the country is still mainly functional, in exactly the areas where national governance has failed.

Samuel Abrams, a political scientist at Sarah Lawrence, has been leading a multiyear national survey of “social capital” for the American Enterprise Institute. Among the findings, released this year, is that by large margins, Americans feel dissatisfied with the course of national events—and by even larger margins, they

feel satisfied with and connected to local institutions and city governments. “When you talk with people, across the board they are optimistic about their own communities, and hopeful about their local futures,” Abrams told me. The AEI team found that 80 percent of Americans considered their own town and neighborhood to be an “excellent” or “good” place to live, and 70 percent said they trusted people in their neighborhood. Does this mainly reflect self-segregation—people of common background or affinity clustering together?

“That’s been exaggerated,”

Abrams said. “America is less monolithic, and more functional at local levels, than people think.”

In *Escape From Rome*, Scheidel writes that “a single condition was essential” for the cultural, economic, and scientific creativity of the post-Roman age: “competitive fragmentation of power.” Today, some of the positive aspects of fragmentation are appearing all around us.

FIVE YEARS AGO, after writing about a “can do” attitude in local governments in Maine and South Carolina, I got an email from a mayor in the Midwest. He said that he thought the underreported story of the moment was how people frustrated with national-level politics were shifting their enthusiasm and their careers to the state and local levels, where they could make a difference. (That mayor’s name was Pete Buttigieg, then in his first term in South Bend, Indiana.) When I spoke with him at the time, he suggested the situation was like people fleeing the world of *Veep*—bleak humor on top of genuine bleakness—for a non-preposterous version of *Parks and Recreation*.

At the national level, “policy work is increasingly being done by people with no training in it, and who don’t care about it, because they’re drawn into national politics purely as culture warriors,” I was told by Philip Zelikow, of the University of Virginia, who worked as a national-security official for both Presidents Bush. “There’s a fiction that mass politics is about policy.” The reality, he said, is that national-level politics has become an exercise in

cultural signaling—“who you like, who you hate, which side you’re on”—rather than about actual governance. Meanwhile, the modern reserves of American practical-mindedness are mainly at the local level, “where people have no choice but to solve problems week by week.”

Based on my own experience I could give a hundred examples of this attitude from around the country, virtually none of them drawing national attention and many of them involving people

The removal of centralized imperial control opened the way to a sustained era of creativity.

creatively expanding the roles of libraries, community colleges, and other institutions to meet local needs. Here is just one, from Indiana: The factory town of Muncie is famed as the site of the *Middletown* sociology studies a century ago. It was the longtime home of the Ball Brothers glass-jar company, since departed. It is still the home of Ball State University, steadily growing. Like other manufacturing cities in the Midwest, Muncie has battled the effects of industrial decline. Among the consequences was a funding crisis for the Muncie Community Schools, which became so severe that two years ago the state took the system into receivership.

Last year, Ball State University became the first-ever public university in the country to assume direct operational responsibility for an entire K-12 public-school system. The experiment has just begun, and its success can’t be assured. But getting this far involved innovation and creativity in the political, civic, financial, and educational realms to win support in a diverse community. “I was talking with a state senator about the plan,” Geoffrey S. Mearns, who has been president of Ball State since 2017 and is a guiding force behind the plan, told me this year in Muncie. “After listening for 15 minutes, he said, ‘You’re crazy. Don’t do this. Run away.’ After another

15 minutes, he said, ‘You’re still crazy. But you have to do it.’”

This craziness and commitment keeps a culture alive. A new world is emerging, largely beyond our notice.

Even when the formal ties of the Roman empire had broken, informal links connected its various parts. In the absence of the Roman state, there was still the Latin language as the original lingua franca; there was still a network of roads. Christianity in some form was a shared religion. Today the links include trade, travel, family lineage, and collaborative research—links that, like the internet, were forged in an era of functioning national and global institutions but with a better chance to endure. “With the waning of federal government, you’d see some states really big enough to act as countries, starting of course with California,” Anne-Marie Slaughter, the CEO of the think tank New America, told me. “You could imagine Texas working with Mexico, and New England with Canada—and the upper-Midwest states as a bloc, and the Pacific Northwest.” She pointed out that states can’t sign formal treaties—but then again, the U.S. Senate has not approved a major treaty in years.

Morley Winograd, a former adviser to Al Gore and a co-author of the new book *Healing American Democracy: Going Local*, argues that networked localities have already taken effective control of crucial policy areas. “If recent trends continue,” he told me, “there’s no reason why community colleges won’t be tuition-free across the country, without any federal role. It’s happened in 13 states, and we’re near a tipping point.” After Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris climate accord, more than 400 U.S. mayors, representing most of the U.S. economy, said their communities would still adhere to it. “That is where most of the leverage lies on sustainability—with mayors and governors,” Winograd told me. He gave the example of planting trees, which might sound insignificant but, according to a new study by researchers in Switzerland, could be a crucial step toward removing excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. “This could spread city by city, state by state, with no federal involvement or limitation,” he said. Last year, the Trump administration said it would abandon the targets for cutting

automobile emissions and improving fuel efficiency that the Obama administration had said automakers must reach. This year, Ford, BMW, Volkswagen, and Honda announced that they would ignore the shift in federal policy. Instead, they would “recognize California’s authority” to set strict emissions and efficiency standards, and would sell cars meeting those standards in all 50 states.

PETER BROWN OBSERVED that “a society under pressure is not necessarily a depressed or a rigid society.” The revival that followed the Roman empire’s collapse, whose full effects were visible only in retrospect, was possible because with the weakening of central government, Roman society

became “exceptionally open to currents from below.”

The world changes as we live in it; we’re all part of a pattern that we can glimpse only dimly. Historians in a thousand years will know for sure whether the American empire in this moment was nearing its own late antiquity. Perhaps by then Muncie and South Bend will loom as large in the historical imagination as the monasteries of Cluny and St. Gall do today. The ancient university towns of Palo Alto and New Haven may lie in different countries. In the meantime, we would do well to recognize and, where possible, nurture the “astounding new beginnings” already under way. **A**

James Fallows is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

Space Jammed



EARTH’S LOWER ORBIT is becoming a little cluttered, and the results could be catastrophic. About 5,450 successful rocket launches have taken place since Sputnik 1 left Earth on October 4, 1957. Approximately 8,950 satellites have been put into orbit. Of those, about 5,000 are still in space, though only 1,950 of them are operational. While Sputnik 1 did the decent thing and disintegrated upon reentering the Earth’s atmosphere, roughly 3,000 defunct satellites didn’t—they still circle the planet, large hunks of space junk. Though they rarely crash into one another, one collision, in February 2009, between a privately owned American communications satellite and a Russian military satellite, created more than 2,300 trackable fragments of space debris.

Estimates suggest that millions of pieces of junk far too small to be tracked are out in space too, mostly the result of spacecraft explosions. Because objects can travel at speeds of up to 17,500 miles an hour, even the tiniest speck of debris hurtling into the side of a spacecraft can cause significant harm. Space-shuttle windows have had to be replaced because of damage caused by mere paint flecks flying through space. And the debris keeps piling up as satellites have gotten smaller, cheaper, and easier to launch. In 2013, only 18 remote-sensing satellites were put into orbit. In 2017, the number was 177. Between 2018 and 2032, forecasts suggest, 3,979 satellites will be launched. Since doubling the number of objects in orbit could quadruple the risk of collisions, debris is sure to pile up faster than ever before.

• Adapted from *The Consequential Frontier: Challenging the Privatization of Space*, by Peter Ward, published by Melville House in October

IDEAS ON MAIN

Can one community's solution be another community's blueprint?

You can learn a whole lot from our country's small cities and towns—if you know where to look. Ideas on Main is a partnership between Atlantic Re:think, the creative marketing team at The Atlantic, and Grow with Google. It presents local initiatives worth emulating through dispatches from around the country.

Follow along: TheAtlantic.com/IdeasOnMain

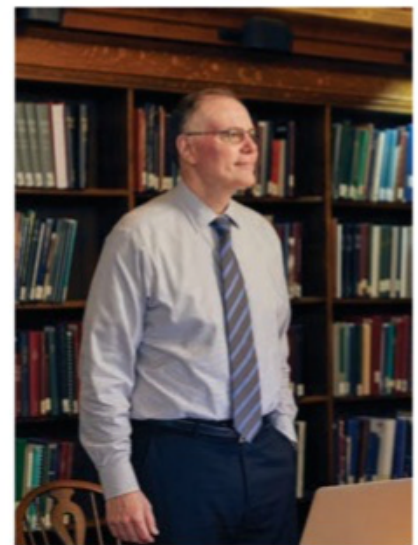
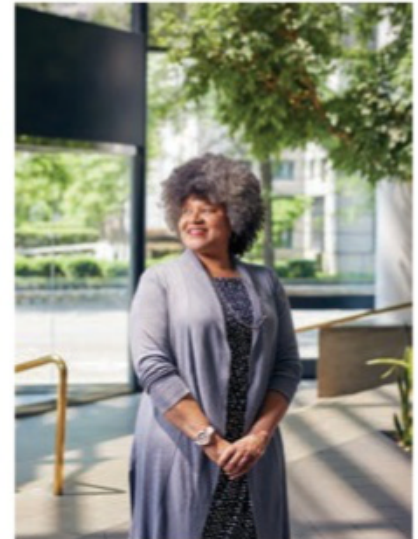


Take a deeper look at what we learned from two communities on the rise.

A partnership between

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Photography by Ty Cole

America Has a Digital Skills Gap. Libraries Can Help Fix It.

SPOTLIGHT ON  BIRMINGHAM, AL

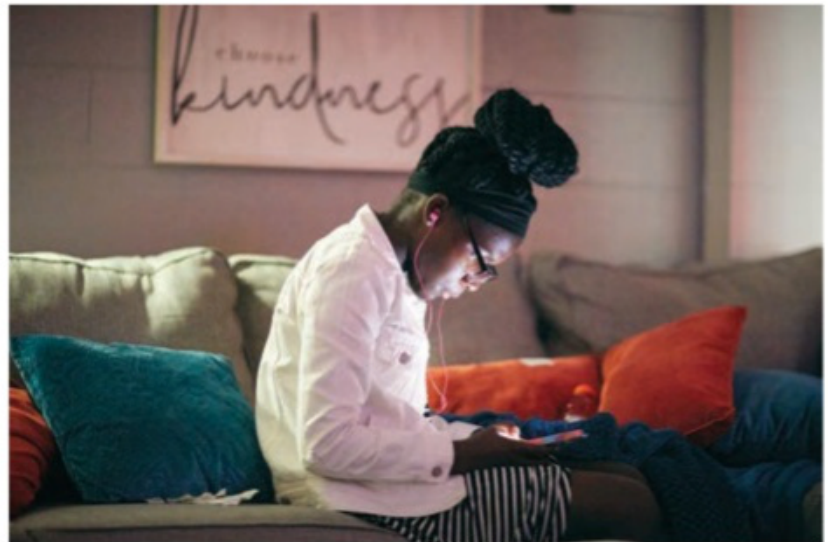
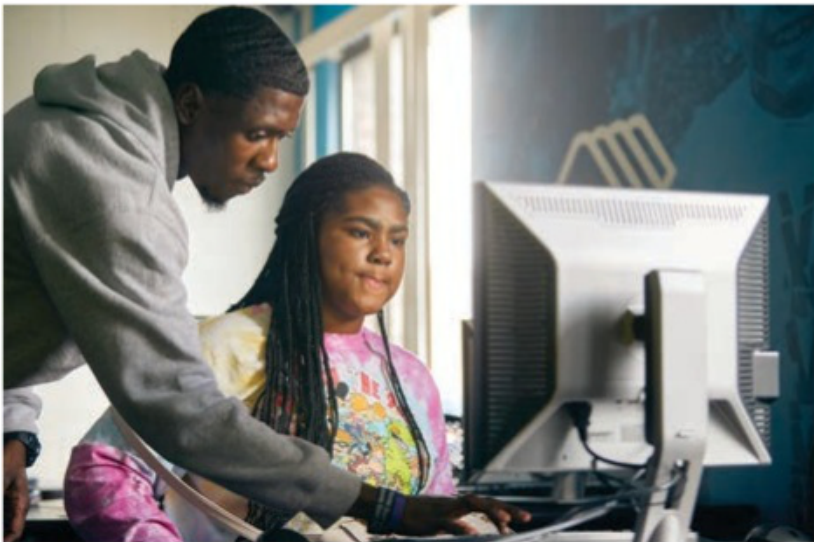
As branches across the country invest in new technologies and digital services, patrons are increasingly seeing them as go-to hubs for personal and professional development.

When Calvester Sanders was promoted to head of housekeeping at the Redmont Hotel in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2016, she felt conflicted. On the one hand, she was excited about the greater responsibility and better pay. On the other, the thought of managing her staff's schedules through the hotel's computer system made her anxious. "I literally didn't know how to turn it on," she says.

It was Sanders's manager who pointed her to the free introductory computer classes at Birmingham Public Library's Central Branch. Despite her nerves, Sanders started attending about twice a week. Within a month, she'd learned enough to feel confident on the job. "I don't know why I was afraid of coming into the computer world," she says. "Now I love it."

The tools of the digital age—computers, the internet, online training programs—are sometimes branded as a threat to the public library's relevance. But that argument ignores people like Sanders, who value their local branches precisely because of the access they provide to those tools and to educators who know how to use them. Talk to Marijke Visser, an associate director and senior policy advocate at the American Library Association, and you'll hear story after story of patrons accessing libraries in ways that could only happen in the 21st century: ranchers in rural Nebraska bidding virtually at bull auctions; farmers in Iowa using a 3-D printer to create missing tractor pieces; veterans in Kentucky using teleconferencing to connect with their doctors. "If they aren't library users, people may have a nostalgic view of libraries from when they were kids," Visser says. "I think people have to experience [today's libraries] to kind of shake that historical view."

Learn how the Birmingham Public Library is leading the way: TheAtlantic.com/IOMLibraries



Photography by Ty Cole

The Smartphone Generation Needs Computer Help

SPOTLIGHT ON  MADISON, WI

Young people may be expert social-media and smartphone users, but many lack the digital skills they need for today's jobs. How can we set them up for success?

On a recent summer afternoon, six teens burst into Kenneth Cole's classroom at the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, located on a quiet residential street in Madison, Wisconsin. With smartphones in hand, they texted and scrolled, chatting with friends both online and in person. It was Cole's job to direct the teens to another type of screen: those of the desktop computers sitting in rows that filled the dark, cozy space.

A recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Cole has been working at the Boys & Girls Club for nearly a year. As an instructor for the Club, helping with a new pilot partnership with Grow with Google, he is tasked with a crucial mission: equipping teens with fundamental digital skills (think: organizing data in a spreadsheet,

collaborating in a digital space, and creating slideshow presentations), which they need to succeed in school, the workforce, and life.

The classes Cole teaches use Grow with Google's Applied Digital Skills online curriculum. One day he may lead Club members in a lesson on building a digital résumé that can be customized quickly and make job-seeking easier when applying online. Another day they may create a blog. On this particular day, they drew up a budget for an upcoming event using a spreadsheet. For kids who are often glued to their smartphones, these types of digital tasks, surprisingly, can be new experiences. Many have never learned how to create a spreadsheet. Some have never worked collaboratively on a document before. "They love technology," Cole says, "but not necessarily the parts of it that will be most helpful for them."

Find out how the Boys & Girls Club is training digital natives: TheAtlantic.com/IOMYouth

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Teens are smartphone and social-media whizzes, so why do they need digital-skills training? We went to **Madison, Wisconsin**, to find out.

Small and medium-sized businesses are exporting more than ever. We traveled to **Solon, Ohio**, to discover what that means for American communities.



In **Colorado Springs, Colorado**, a wife-and-wife team grew their stationery and gift business by using digital tools to reach new customers.

In **Cleveland's Fairfax** neighborhood, residents are accessing IT support training through a Grow with Google partnership.

When coal miners in **Pikeville, Kentucky**, lost their jobs, local businessmen started Bit Source to teach them how to code.

How can libraries best serve their communities? We went to **Birmingham, Alabama**, to investigate.

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Since 2017, more than three million Americans have grown their businesses and careers with help from Grow with Google's trainings and in-person workshops. And through a network of more than 5,000 partner

organizations—including local libraries, schools, and nonprofits—more people across the country have access to our free online tools and flexible programs.

Technology has the power to unlock new opportunities for growth. When those opportunities are available to everyone, communities across the country can achieve their full potential.



• POLITICS

THE LOST GENERATION

Gen X may never produce a president.
That's bad news for Americans of all ages.

BY PETER BEINART

FOR ALMOST 60 YEARS, two generations have held the American presidency. The Greatest Generation—born in the early 20th century—first won the White House in 1960, when John F. Kennedy was 43. Baby Boomers—born after

World War II—took over in 1992, when Bill Clinton was 46. By this precedent, Generation X was ripe for a president in 2016. Three of the early Republican front-runners—Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Scott Walker—would have entered the

Oval Office in their 40s. But each faltered, and America replaced Barack Obama, a young Boomer, with Donald Trump, an older Boomer. Rather than choose a generational successor, America elected a candidate 15 years older than the president he replaced, the largest such jump in American history.

Now Gen Xers have another shot. Many of the 2020 presidential contenders who sparked early enthusiasm—Cory Booker, Beto O'Rourke, Kirsten Gillibrand, Julián Castro, and Kamala Harris—were born between the mid-1960s and 1980, the span that defines Generation X. (Harris, born in 1964, is on its cusp.) But as of midsummer, with the exception of Harris, they're all below 5 percent in national polls. The result is a top tier of candidates that, in addition to Harris, includes three who are roughly Trump's age—Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren—and Pete Buttigieg, a Millennial.

If a Gen Xer doesn't win in 2020, there will be another chance in 2024. But by that time the field may be crowded with Millennials—born from 1981 to 1996—whose ranks include Buttigieg, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and rising Republican stars such as Representatives Dan Crenshaw and Matt Gaetz. Sandwiched between two larger and more politically consequential generations—Boomers and Millennials—Generation X may never produce a president at all.

This electoral weakness isn't coincidental. It reflects an ideological problem. Rubio, Cruz, Walker, Booker, O'Rourke, Castro, and Harris all entered adulthood between the Reagan and Clinton eras, and launched their political careers around the turn of the millennium. That means they likely began forming their political beliefs at a time when the Republican Party had a strong pro-immigration wing and leading Democrats embraced free trade, tough anti-crime policies, and charter schools. Then, as they came closer to running for president, an ideological earthquake hit.

Since 2016, the Democratic Party has lurched left. Nativists have taken over the GOP. Among activists in both parties, views that were once mainstream are now widely reviled. Gen X politicians have responded by either downplaying or repudiating their prior positions. That's unfortunate, because not everything that leading Republicans and Democrats

believed before the parties reinvented themselves has been proved wrong. Gen X politicians could help check the hubris of the present—if only they would now defend what they once believed.

ACCORDING TO social scientists, events that occur while people are entering adulthood have a disproportionate influence on their political views. That doesn't mean everyone who comes of age around the same time interprets those events in the same way. Rather, particular eras create particular intragenerational arguments. Think about the way Baby Boomers have spent their political careers debating the legacy of the Vietnam War.

The fight that has defined Generation X is between conservatives who came of age idolizing Ronald Reagan and liberals who came of age embracing Bill Clinton's response to him. As ideological children of Reagan, who granted legal status to nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants, Cruz, Walker, and Rubio expressed sympathy for immigration before the 2016 election season. Cruz argued for doubling the cap on the number of immigrants America could admit every year; Walker supported a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants; and Rubio helped write a 2013 Senate bill to create a path to citizenship.

Then, in 2015, Donald Trump—who, as a political neophyte, was largely unconstrained by traditional Republican views on immigration—jumped to the top of the polls in the Republican presidential race by denigrating Mexican immigrants and demanding a wall to keep undocumented immigrants out. Finding themselves on the wrong side of a tectonic shift in the GOP, his Gen X competitors jettisoned their earlier views. Asked in a 2015 debate why he no longer supported a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants—a position, the moderator noted, that he had held “from 2002 until as recently as 2013”—Walker responded that he had “listened to the American people.” Rubio said that although he had helped draft the 2013 Senate bill that provided a path to citizenship, he hadn't expected it to become law. Cruz claimed that an amendment he'd supported to dramatically increase the number of H-1B visas for foreign workers had been a ploy to sabotage the passage of any immigration bill at all.

The insincerity was obvious, and it didn't work. In many primaries and caucuses, according to data published by *FiveThirtyEight*, Trump won the lion's share of voters who called immigration their top concern. During his presidency, Rubio and Cruz have largely supported his immigration agenda in the Senate. That's unfortunate. Comprehensive research suggests that while immigration imposes some fiscal costs, and disadvantages some Americans, it benefits the American economy as a whole. But these Gen X Republicans who once promoted that view have mostly gone silent.

GEN X DEMOCRATS have suffered a similar crisis of confidence. Consider Beto O'Rourke's and Julián Castro's shifting stances on trade. By the time each ran for city council in their Texas hometowns of El Paso and San Antonio in the 2000s, they had witnessed the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which Clinton had signed into law in 1993. Initially, El Paso saw low-wage manufacturing jobs go south of the border, but over time, as Texas and Mexico grew more economically intertwined, fortunes rebounded. A 2016 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas found that since NAFTA had gone into effect, average income levels in El Paso and other Texas border cities had come closer to those in the nation as a whole. And according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in San Antonio, which averaged more than 6 percent in the three years prior to NAFTA taking effect (the Bureau's data starts in 1990), has averaged about 5 percent in the 25 years since.

Given the data, it's not surprising that both O'Rourke and Castro hailed free trade before running for president. “Since the signing of NAFTA,” Castro declared in 2012, “San Antonio has blossomed into a major center of trade.” O'Rourke in 2015 voted to give Obama the authority to negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which, he said, offered the “chance for El Paso to capitalize on its growing status as a leading trade community.”

But as the Democratic Party has moved left, O'Rourke's and Castro's

support for free trade has left them ideologically marooned. Castro now calls for renegotiating NAFTA, and has said he sympathizes with people who feel that many trade deals were “entered into with the concern of the big corporations first instead of the American worker.” O'Rourke wants to renegotiate it too, though not markedly, despite most studies showing that NAFTA has had a

Gen X politicians could help check the hubris of the present—if only they would now defend what they once believed.

modestly positive overall impact on the American economy.

Kamala Harris's retreat has been on truancy. In 2006, as San Francisco's district attorney, she launched an initiative to reduce the number of students who chronically missed school without a valid excuse, a problem that, in the words of one 2005 study, had “reached epidemic proportions in urban academic settings.” The initiative was classically Clintonian, an effort to pair the two principles in which he grounded many of his policies: opportunity and responsibility. To help parents keep their kids in school, Harris created a hotline through which they could get referrals to services. Her office advertised the hotline on city buses that passed through neighborhoods where truancy rates were high. But she also sent a letter to parents warning them that truancy was against the law. Before prosecution, parents of truant children went through a lengthy, noncriminal process with school officials. But when that didn't work, Harris's office could bring them to court.

At the time, Harris's tough-on-truancy policy fit the Democratic mood. Thirteen years later, it's become a political liability. Numerous left-leaning commentators have slammed it as part of the criminalization of poverty that in recent decades has incarcerated vast numbers of young men of color. Progressives are right that the tough-on-crime policies of the Clinton

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GENERAL MOTORS



era had devastating effects, and that Harris wrongly defended some of them. But her anti-truancy initiative—which she launched after studying data on the correlation between truancy during childhood and crime later on—was designed to keep people *out of jail*. And the effort appears to have kept kids in school: Between the 2007–08 and 2010–11 school years, the percentage of students in San Francisco public schools deemed chronically truant fell from 4 to 2.5 percent.

Progressive critics might argue that Harris could have achieved those results without threatening parents with fines or jail. But she didn't lock up any parents of truants; very few even paid a fine. In most instances, judges dismissed cases on the condition that the parents took actions to get their kid to school. Why did it take a court summons to get some families the help they needed? It's called the "black-robe effect." For some people, a judge's demand carries more weight than a school administrator's plea, even when they're urging the same thing. In the hardest cases, giving people an opportunity to get help isn't enough—demanding that they exercise responsibility is necessary too.

Nonetheless, Harris has backpedaled. Although she declared in her 2009 book, *Smart on Crime*, that "fighting truancy might very well be the single most important thing we can do to impact the future of crime," the issue is absent from the criminal-justice section of her campaign website. This spring, she said she regrets the way other California prosecutors implemented a 2011 statewide anti-truancy law that she'd pushed. In the current ideological climate, Democrats won't even defend Clintonian policies that they know have worked.

Something similar has happened to Cory Booker on education. Booker, like Bill Clinton, once advocated for charter schools, which operate without many of the regulations that govern traditional public schools. After becoming mayor of Newark, New Jersey, Booker, according to *The New Yorker*, set out to make the city "the charter school capital of the nation." Aided by an infusion of money from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and others, he made progress toward achieving that goal. From the 2009–10 to 2017–18 school years, the share of Newark students attending charter schools rose from 12 to 33 percent.

The data have been impressive. While achievement growth in math ended up flat, English gains in Newark schools have significantly improved since Booker launched his reforms, according to a study by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard. (Although funded by what is now the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the study—conducted by researchers at Harvard and Dartmouth—was peer-reviewed.) The study found that the movement of students from traditional public schools to higher-quality charters helped drive this progress. According to data from the Newark Board of Education,

graduation rates have improved too. That finding is consistent with a 2015 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford showing that students in urban charter schools perform substantially better than students in other urban public schools.

Nonetheless, as Bernie Sanders's socialist message has gained influence, the mood inside the Democratic Party has turned against charter schools. Sanders has proposed a halt to government funding of new charter schools. Even a relative moderate, Pete Buttigieg, has called for slowing their expansion, according to

• CRIMINAL TENDENCIES

Are Serial Killers More Common Than We Think?

The factors in modern life that have made it easier to kill, without consequence, again and again

BY RENE CHUN

THE HELTER-SKELTER 1970s and '80s are remembered as the serial killer's heyday—think of Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz. Since then, data suggest, the number of serial killers—defined by the National Institute of Justice as those who commit two or more separate murders, often with a psychological motive and a sadistic sexual component—has plunged, falling 85 percent in three decades; the FBI now says that serial killers account for fewer than 1 percent of killings. Several reasons are commonly cited for this decline, among them

longer prison sentences and a reduction in parole (many serial killers are convicted murderers who, after serving time, kill again). Better forensic science is also credited, as are cultural and technological shifts: less hitchhiking, more helicopter parents, 60 million security cameras.

But here's a curious fact. As the number of serial killings has supposedly fallen, so too has the rate of murder cases solved—or "cleared," in detective lingo. In 1965, the U.S. homicide clearance rate was 91 percent. By 2017, it had dropped to 61.6 percent, one of the lowest rates in the Western world. In other

words, about 40 percent of the time, murderers get away with murder.

Some experts believe that serial killers are responsible for a significant number of these unsolved murders. Thomas Hargrove, the founder of the Murder Accountability Project, a nonprofit that compiles data on homicide, has examined how many unsolved murders are linked by DNA evidence. He believes that at least 2 percent of murders are committed by serial offenders—translating to about 2,100 unidentified serial killers. Michael Arntfield, a retired police detective and the author of 12 books on serial murder, agrees that the FBI's projections are off (he blames patchy data, among other things) but thinks the number of active serial killers is more like 3,000 or 4,000.

If such estimates are right, why aren't more killers getting caught? Take Samuel Little. He isn't a household name, yet the California inmate's confessed death toll, across 14 states and four decades, appears to be triple Bundy's. Since 2012,

NBC News. And Booker has dramatically muted his support for them; the education section of his campaign website makes no mention of charter schools. When Los Angeles teachers went on strike earlier this year, in part to protest the expansion of charter schools, Booker publicly supported them (though he didn't link his support with their views on charter schools).

IT IS LAUDABLE when politicians admit they were wrong to champion policies that have failed. And many of the policies that enjoyed widespread support around the time Gen X politicians

were first seeking office—from the Iraq War to mass incarceration—*have* failed. Those failures laid the foundation for the ideological revolts that have transformed both parties since 2016, and those transformations were overdue. It's a good thing that Donald Trump is more reluctant to attack Iran than George W. Bush was to attack Iraq. It's a good thing that Democrats are now contemplating massive infrastructure investments to stave off climate change.

But there's a fundamental difference between admitting you were wrong when the evidence has proved you wrong and

pretending you were wrong when the evidence has proved you right, just because the political tides have shifted. It's the difference between humility and cowardice.

By defending policies that have worked but are now ideologically out of favor, Gen X politicians could combat presentism, the recurring tendency—especially among progressives—to condescendingly dismiss the ideas of the past.

Young activists disdainful of the Clinton and Obama presidencies are remaking the Democratic Party. But new generations tend to overcompensate for the failures of their predecessors. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were so eager to distinguish themselves from the isolationists of the 1930s that they forgot that an earlier generation's skepticism of war—born from the disillusionment of World War I—had lessons to teach despite the necessity of World War II. Heeding those lessons might have kept America from losing 58,000 soldiers in Vietnam.

After the economic woes of the Jimmy Carter years, Clinton-era New Democrats were so determined to prove that the party was not antibusiness that they deregulated Wall Street in ways that contributed to the 2008 financial crash. In the 1990s, many New Democrats also dismissed labor unions because of their belief in the free market. Today the pendulum has swung again, and Democrats eager for labor's embrace are joining with teachers' unions to oppose a charter-school movement that enjoys overwhelming support from African American and Latino Democrats.

As the in-between generation—old enough to have witnessed the Clinton era as adults but young enough to learn from its failures—Gen X Democrats could warn against the hubris of the present, as Ted Kennedy warned against Clinton's endorsement of welfare reform in the 1990s and older foreign-policy thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lippmann warned against Johnson's escalations in Vietnam.

What matters most isn't whether Gen X produces a president. It's whether it helps America's next president—whatever his or her generation—learn from the past rather than sneer at it. **A**

Peter Beinart is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

police have linked him to at least 60 homicides, and he claims to have committed 33 more. According to Arntfield, killers like Little have benefited from the falling clearance rate, which he in turn attributes to a handful of factors: increased expertise (killers have studied other murderers' mistakes and know how to fool cops, for example by planting false evidence), constrained resources (thanks to stagnant salaries, detectives in some areas may be less qualified than their predecessors), growing social isolation (which can make potential victims more vulnerable), and greater geographic mobility (which can make dots harder to connect).

One illustration of the last point can be found

in the trucking industry, which has drawn scrutiny from law-enforcement officials. As an FBI press release put it in 2016, "If there is such a thing as an ideal profession for a serial killer, it may well be as a long-haul truck driver." Truckers appeared on the bureau's radar more than a decade ago, when an investigation revealed that women were being murdered along the I-40 corridor. Since then, the FBI's Highway Serial Killings Initiative has investigated the murders of more than 750 victims found near highways, and identified nearly 450 potential suspects, a disproportionate number of them truck drivers. "The victims in these cases are primarily women who are living high-risk, transient

lifestyles," the FBI has said. "They're frequently picked up at truck stops or service stations." Mike Aamodt, the founder of Radford University's Serial Killer Information Center, says truckers are well positioned to evade detection. "The more locations you're operating in," he added, "the more difficult it is for law enforcement to see a link."

Of course, would-be homicidal maniacs lurk in all kinds of jobs. Bundy was a law student. Samuel Little was a boxer and an ambulance attendant. In his book *Murder in Plain English*, Arntfield breaks down the top serial-killer professions, and finds that truckers are joined by police and military personnel, forestry workers, hotel porters, and warehouse managers, among others. In each case, the problem isn't so much the people who fill the job, but the job itself. The key question, Aamodt told me, is whether a given vocation's duties hinder or enable killing on the side: "The gas-station attendant has no opportunity. The long-haul trucker has lots of opportunity." **A**





THE CULTURE FILE

BOOKS, ARTS, AND ENTERTAINMENT

THE OMNIVORE

Broken Spies for a Broken England

Mick Herron is the
John le Carré of the Brexit era.

BY JAMES PARKER

ARE YOU a good reader, reader? Patient, curious, broadly cultured, and so on? I'm not—not anymore. Decades of email-checking have splintered my concentration; more recently and speedily, I've rotted out my attention span with Netflix and end-of-the-republic updates. Of the new mind, the prodigious and fluently networking postdigital mind, I am not in possession; I have only the perishing old mind, bleaching in chunks like the Great Barrier Reef. To sit in a chair, in a pool of educated light, and turn the pages of a novel ... No chance. I twitch, I bounce. I start reaching for things. Then I get groggy.

So when somebody writes a book that grips and settles me, that makes a reader out of me again, I become quite helpless with gratitude. I feel this way about Mick Herron. Born in Newcastle upon Tyne, in England, and educated at Oxford, Herron writes squeakingly well-plotted spy thrillers. More than that, he composes—at the rate of a pulpist—the kind of efficient, darkly witty, tipped-with-imagery sentences that feel purpose-built to perforate my private daze of illiteracy. More than *that*, he's a world-bringer, the creator of a still-growing fictional universe with its own gravity, lingo, and surface tension. He whacks his characters and winnows his cast with real 21st-century anti-sentimentality, but there always seems to be enough life-energy around to generate more stories. A TV series is in the works, and a new novel, *Joe Country*, was published in June.

At the center of Herron's mythosphere is a terrible, terrible office: Slough House. Although ... can Slough House be at the center of anything? It's a terminus, permanently dislodged from—at odds with, even—the flow of existence. A grimly nondescript building somewhere in the London borough of Finsbury, a concrescence of London dilapidation and anonymity, Slough House is where you'll find the "slow horses"—the MI5 operatives deemed too dysfunctional, addicted, high-risk, or failure-prone for anything but the most grinding busy-work. J. K. Coe is there, monastically hoodied, sizzling with PTSD, listening to Keith Jarrett in his earbuds and not talking to anyone. Shirley Dander is there, always thinking about the wrap of cocaine in her pocket. ("It wasn't like Shirley was an habitual user. It was a weekend thing with her, strictly Thursday



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to Tuesday.”) The manager of Slough House, its twice-as-toxic David Brent, its stained and farting Buddha, is Jackson Lamb. Once a formidable “joe”—Herron-speak for an agent—at Berlin Station, Lamb is now a chain-smoking, whiskey-drinking shambles and a creature of coal-black cynicism. Herron’s slow horses are always being pulled into plots, called upon to exercise their latent joe skills. As rejects, they are the natural enemies of the elite. They can smell a false-flag operation a mile off. No fake news for these genuine losers. In *Joe Country*, a hunt for the missing son of a deceased slow horse leads to an encounter with the most infernal echelons of the Establishment.

Herron has written 13 novels—six in the Slough House series—but he began his literary career as a poet. These are the opening lines of *Joe Country*:

The owl flew screaming from the barn, its wing-tips bright with flame. For a moment, silhouetted against the blank sky, it was a dying angel, scorched by its own divinity, and then it was just a sooty husk, dropping like an anvil into the nearby trees.

Angel/anvil, ascent and gravity in paired syllables. Let’s hear it for the poet’s ear. The previous Slough House novel, 2018’s *London Rules*, kicks off with an assault-weapon attack on an English village: “The jeep, which had idled throughout the brief carnage, spat stones as it accelerated away.” It could be a scene from the British poet David Harsent’s apocalyptic 2005 sequence, *Legion*: “We cut our engines, then, and the dust / settled in silence.” It’s the same wiry language, the same sensation of shock acting on space.

Espionage is a shadow battle; it looks like the psyche. “On a normal day,” muses a spy in *Joe Country*, “London was bright and busy, full of open spaces and well-lit squares. But it was also trap streets and ghost stations; a spook realm below the real.” In this realm, people change shape; graves open and dead things rise; stories turn inside out. Like John le Carré—with whom he has been much compared—Herron is obsessed with that area of human experience, that area of the human brain, where paranoia overlaps with an essential, feral vigilance. “Since leaving the Park he’d had that uneasy sense of footsteps in synch with his own. There were tricks you could pull—double back to check a shop window, pause to fix a shoelace, halt at a bus stop ...” No such thing as coincidence. Ordinary, bovine, walking-down-the-street life is an illusion, a sleep-state. Don’t get caught standing around: bad tradecraft.

Now and again le Carré’s Cold War—that ’70s Eastern Bloc dowdiness, all those strange drawling characters sipping their tea in a fuggy room in Cambridge Circus—reaches with long fingers into

Like le Carré, Herron is obsessed with that area of the human brain where paranoia overlaps with vigilance.



JOE COUNTRY
MICK HERRON
Soho Press

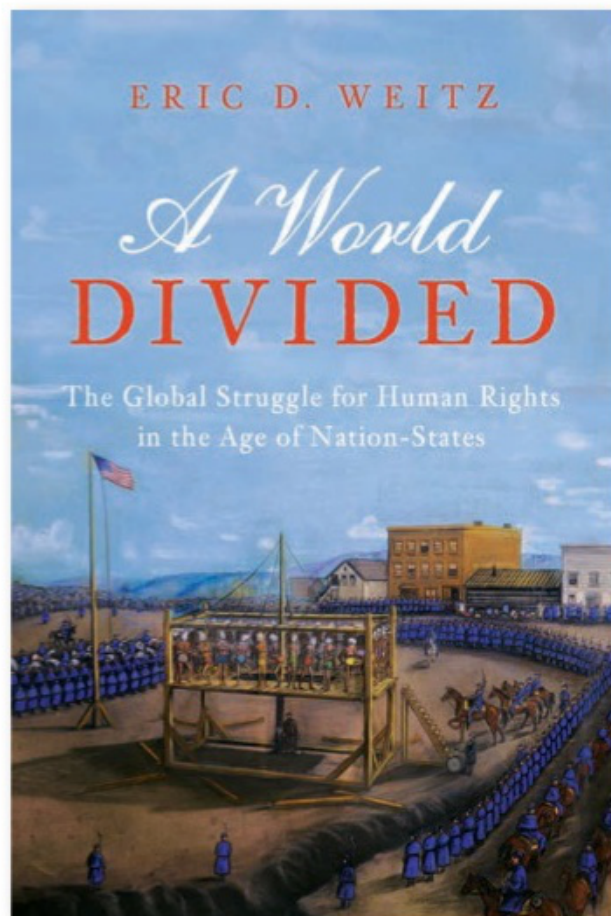
the Slough House milieu. Reckonings occur, decades delayed. The grandfather of one slow horse is a George Smiley-era spy sinking into dementia; narratives and counternarratives are coming loose in his head. But Herron was on the Underground, going to work, when London was bombed on July 7, 2005, and the mood of his spies is un-le Carré: a jazzy, jangled hyperalertness. Carnage is only a heartbeat—a switch, a trigger—away. The London where the slow horses live is an invisibly fanatical city: jihadists, rogue actors, wandering nodes of annihilation approaching the zero hour.

Working as fast as Herron does, you can stay close to life as it’s being lived and close, also, to the hallucination known as current events. “My feeling about Brexit,” he told *The Irish Times* earlier this year, “is people with vested interests have manipulated and lied to large sections of the community. There is a part of me that would like to go back and burn down the bastions of privilege that allowed these people to take over in such a self-serving way.” Well, there are several Brexits, but one of them, indeed, is the kind of elitist conspiracy that the slow horses—in their cack-handed, explosive way—are constantly uncovering.

The installation of Boris Johnson in 10 Downing Street will have done nothing to appease Herron. Peter Judd, the bicycle-riding, conscience-free home secretary in 2016’s *Real Tigers*, is less a caricature of Johnson than a police artist’s sketch: “He was a bulky man, not fat, but large, and though he had turned fifty the previous year, retained the schoolboy looks and fluffy-haired manner that had endeared him to the British public.” Isn’t that Johnson, lasering toward power under his halo of bumble? His fellow Brexiteer Nigel Farage makes an appearance, sort of, in *London Rules*, as the populist Dennis Gimball: “What should have been a cameo became a career, and the whole thing went on for what felt like decades.” Spoiler alert: Gimball gets his head knocked off by a falling paint can. The novelist’s revenge.

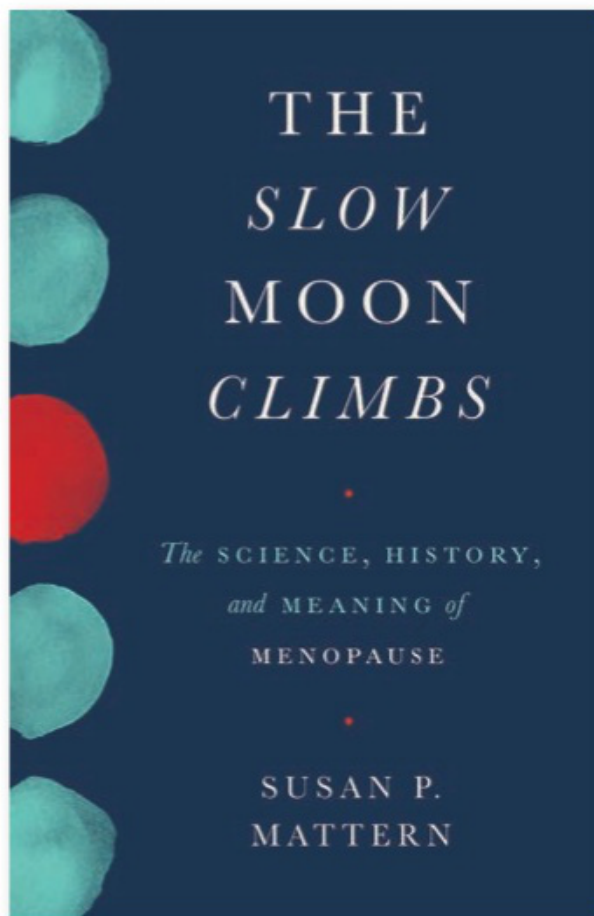
Herron has been praised for the wit and velocity of the workplace banter at Slough House—the in-fighting, and the awful, un-PC things that come out of Jackson Lamb’s mouth: “I’m an ardent feminist, as you know. But haven’t you girls got better things to worry your little heads about?” A little of this, I find, goes a long way. Sections of *London Rules* in particular seemed to me to be rather clogged with *Veep*-like repartee. *Joe Country* corrects the error. The slow horses are drawn out of fast-talking London and into wintry Wales, land of snowy ditches and burning owls. The bastions of privilege are casting their long shadow. And in joe country—the place, the mind-set, where the spies live—there are ironies and inversions, but no jokes. **A**

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



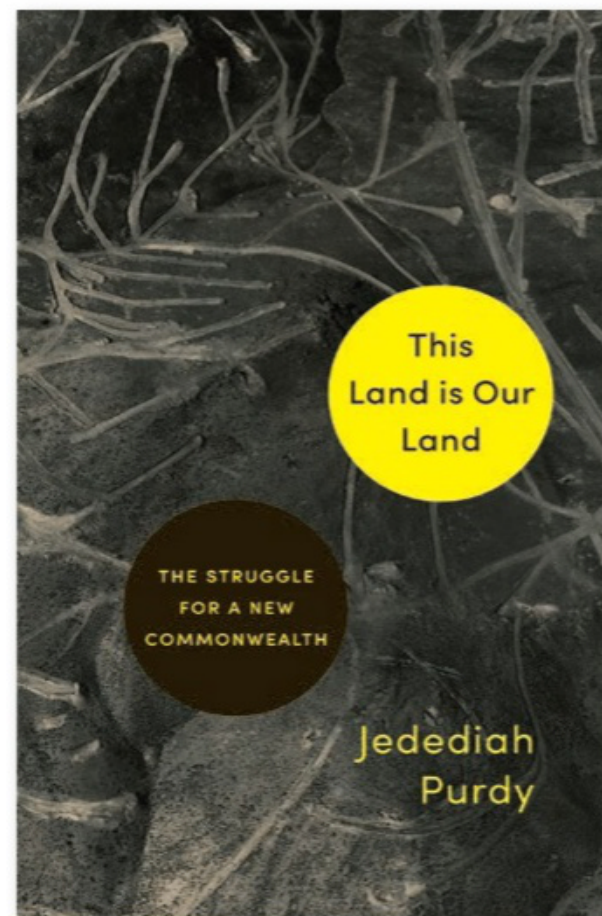
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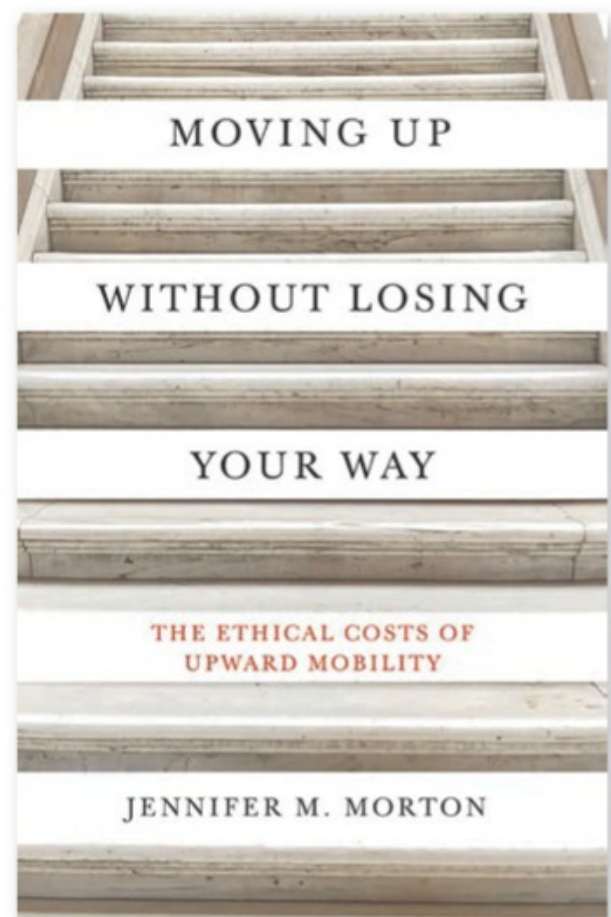
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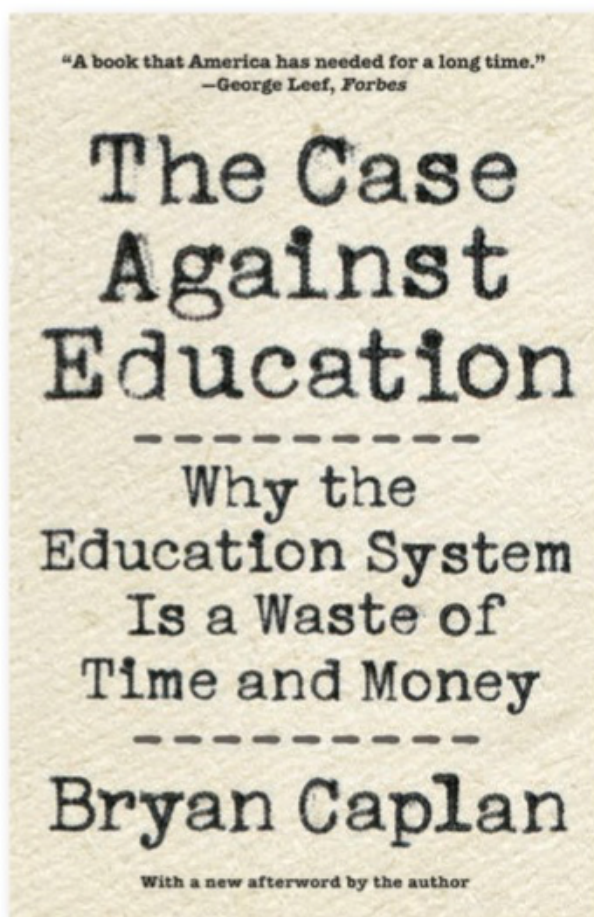
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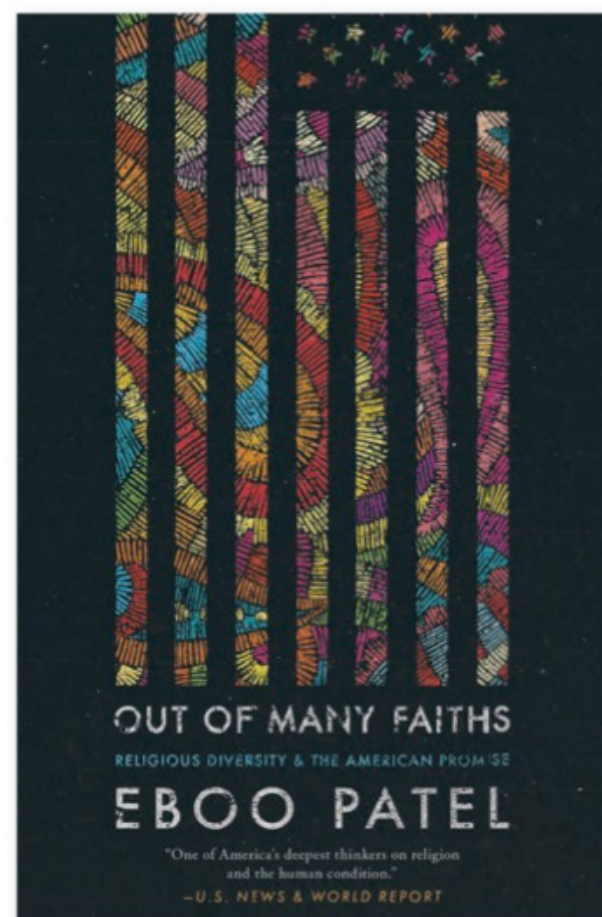
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BOOKS

Misunderstanding Susan Sontag

Her beauty and celebrity eclipse the real source of her allure—her commitment to cool control.

BY MERVE EMRE

“**T**O EXPERIENCE A THING as beautiful means: to experience it necessarily wrongly,” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*. It is a line that Susan Sontag quotes toward the end of her 1977 essay collection, *On Photography*, about how photographs aestheticize misery. It is a line that Sontag’s authorized biographer, Benjamin Moser, quotes to describe Sontag’s susceptibility to beautiful, but punishing, lovers. And it is a line that I am quoting to summarize how Moser’s monumental and stylish biography, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*, fails its subject—a woman whose beauty, and the sex appeal and celebrity that went along with it, Moser insists upon to the point of occluding what makes her so deeply interesting.

The fascination of Sontag lies in her endurance as a cultural icon, the model of how a woman should think and write in public, even though her thinking and writing weren’t very rigorous. What is intriguing about Sontag is less who she was than how we understand our desire for her, or someone like her, to occupy a rare position in American literary culture: that of a dark-haired, dark-eyed, apparently invulnerable woman capable of transforming intellectual seriousness into an erotic spectacle. What need does such a presence and performance satisfy?

Sontag herself was wary of the impulse to anoint. In her 1975 essay “A Woman’s Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source?” she argues that conceiving of a woman’s beauty as antithetical to her other virtues makes beauty morally suspect: “We not only split off—with the greatest facility—the ‘inside’ (character, intellect) from the ‘outside’ (looks); but we are actually surprised when someone who is beautiful is also intelligent, talented, good.” The power of beauty is self-negating, Sontag warns. It is a “power ... always conceived in relation to men; it is not the power to do but the power to attract.” We need “some critical distance” from beauty if we are to avoid the “crude trap” of treating a woman’s self-presentation as separable from, and opposed to, her interior self.

One imagines that Sontag would have been dismayed to see her biographer adopting exactly these dichotomies to frame her life and work. “Susan Sontag was America’s last great literary star,” Moser proclaims in his introduction. “She was incongruous: a beautiful young woman who was intimidatingly learned.” In public she was “The Dark Lady of American Letters.” (The title was, in fact, originally given by Norman Podhoretz to Mary McCarthy, who

upon meeting Sontag was said to have remarked, “Oh, you’re the imitation me.”) In private she was “Miss Librarian,” Sontag’s name for her studious self. “The camera-ready version of Susan Sontag would always remain at odds with Miss Librarian,” Moser continues. “Never, perhaps, had a great beauty worked less hard at being beautiful. She often expressed her astonishment at encountering the glamorous woman in the photographs.”

Sontag: Her Life and Work assumes this same attitude of astonishment as Moser sets out to measure the distance between “the individual” who was Sontag—brilliant, studious, insensitive, dishonest, ashamed of her sexuality, a glutton for emotional pain—and “the representation of the individual” that became Sontag, the “Sibyl of Manhattan.” For Sontag, Moser argues, the gap between “a thing and its symbol,” between metaphor and reality, was “a matter of life and death.”

HER LIFE BEGAN ordinarily enough, on the West Side of Manhattan in the winter of 1933. She was born Susan Lee Rosenblatt, daughter of Mildred, a vain and cruel alcoholic, and Jack, a tubercular fur salesman who died when Sue was 5. She was a precocious and lonely child. Her friends were her books: *Madame Curie*, *Les Misérables*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Martin Eden*. Her mother, who was intimidated by Sue’s intelligence, dragged her and her sister, Judith, from New York to Miami Beach to Tucson—where Mildred met and married an Army pilot named Nat Sontag—and finally to Los Angeles in 1946. “Sue, if you read so much you’ll never find a husband,” her stepfather warned her. But Sue didn’t listen.

At 16, Sontag left home for UC Berkeley. There she discovered Djuna Barnes’s tale of lesbian desire and despair, *Nightwood*, and, while browsing at a bookstore, met the woman who would be her on-again, off-again lover for the next decade, Harriet Sohmers. (“Have you read *Nightwood*?” was Sohmers’s excellent pickup line.) Sontag was unnerved by her attraction to women, determined to “force” herself “to have sex with men,” she wrote in her diary. When she transferred to the University of Chicago at the end of the academic year, “her kind of beauty found fervent admirers,” Moser writes. She began working as a research assistant for a young economics professor named Philip Rieff, whom she married after one week of diligent note-taking. (“Don’t laugh! he’s not handsome,” she told her mother.) While pregnant with their son, David, she began co-writing Rieff’s first book, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer*. Rieff (who did not credit her) got a job at Brandeis University, and in the fall of 1952, they moved east. Two years later, she began graduate school in English at Harvard.

Sontag grew to hate marriage and Harvard, so she left them both, as well as her son, to study



philosophy at the University of Oxford, which she also hated. (“There is a type—the male virgin—lots of them in England,” she complained. Also, the weather was bad.) When she left “boring Oxford” in 1957, first for France, then for New York, she embarked on the most productive period of her life. New Left publications like *The New York Review of Books* and *The Partisan Review* championed her. In 1963, she published her first novel, *The Benefactor*, and one year later “Notes on ‘Camp,’” a list of playful, exhilarating observations about camp as a sensibility, and its “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” The essay landed her in *Time* magazine, where she was identified as “one of Manhattan’s brightest young intellectuals,” transforming her from a mere essayist into “a midcult commodity,” according to Nora Ephron. “Notes on ‘Camp’” was followed, in rapid succession, by *Against Interpretation* (1966), *Death Kit* (1967), and *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), all published before her 37th birthday.

But the more Sontag wrote, the more she fretted about writing. Periods of intense productivity were interspersed with periods of “lacerating insecurities,” Moser writes. After expressing disdain for the “exclusiveness, the possessiveness of marriage,” she spent the 1960s and ’70s in a series of devastating entanglements with women:

Sontag’s lack of awareness and her insecurity were almost never on public display.

a downtown party girl, a European duchess, a modern dancer, a filmmaker. “There is something Olympian about her sex life,” Moser opines. “How many American women of her generation had lovers, male and female, as numerous, beautiful, and prominent?” Her affairs left her in childlike states of bewilderment, shattered and sleepless. Overly possessive of her son, she “groomed him as a companion,” clutching David closer than a mother should. As she entered her 40s, her friends “remarked that she was even more than usually insensitive to others, more prone to fabrication.”

Yet Sontag’s lack of awareness and her insecurity were almost never on public display—not when, at 42, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, not when chemotherapy turned her hair white. She dyed all but a front shock black and finished two books during her treatments: *On Photography* and *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), the latter of which railed against psychological accounts of cancer as a disease of “repression” without ever mentioning her cancer. Her illness prompted her to reevaluate her youthful leftism. She broke with the New Left in 1982, at a Town Hall event where she denounced communism, flanked by one of the great loves of her life, the morose Soviet dissident Joseph Brodsky. “She became a liberal,” Moser writes, and as she entered her 50s, the pace of her writing slowed. Intermittently estranged from her son, who was installed as her editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, she did not produce another book, aside from a collection of essays, until *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, in 1989. She finished it as she tended to a friend dying of AIDS.

The year the book came out, she met her last love, the photographer Annie Leibovitz. They spent the final decade and a half of Sontag’s life living like divas in their extravagant New York apartments, Sontag loving and abusing Leibovitz—“You’re so dumb,” she would yell—while also traveling the world. During the Bosnian war, Sontag and Leibovitz went to Sarajevo, where the couple became what Sontag, in her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), called “star witnesses” to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Eager to capture the despair of waiting for international intervention, she arrived with a script of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The production, with a set made from United Nations plastic sheeting, “became a cultural event in the highest sense of the term,” Moser writes in all earnestness. Sontag returned to Sarajevo often before her death from cancer, in 2004. Her last words, to her son, “I want to tell you ...,” revealed that she still had things to say.

Moser packs in an extraordinary amount of detail. Yet the book feels strangely vacuous, or at least no more psychologically revealing than either Sontag’s diaries or the earlier unauthorized biography by Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock. Aptly enough, the problem is one of interpretation.



GEORGE ROSE/GETTY



Moser's analysis of Sontag's life as an unwinnable battle between her public self and her private self traffics in the crudest of oppositions: appearance versus character, mind versus body, intellectualism versus eroticism, persona versus private self. Erecting these dichotomies is the biography's narrative mode, its method of building intrigue and suspense. Can you believe, Moser wonders, that a beautiful and intelligent woman could be insecure about her professional success? Can you believe that inhuman productivity, fueled by chronic insomnia, a violent disdain for napping, and an addiction to speed, might be an attempt to compensate for social isolation? Can you believe that having sex and falling in love with many people, of many persuasions, might trouble the divide between mind and body? "Susan—human—drove people away," Moser concludes. "But the symbolic Sontag was tremendously attractive."

Moser's interpretations often fall back on armchair psychology, pathologizing Sontag's relationships by making everything symptomatic of something else. Too many roads lead back to her mother, who emerges as Sontag and Moser's shared villain. "Many of the apparently rebarbative aspects of Sontag's personality are clarified in light of the alcoholic family system," Moser writes, describing how Mildred's addiction impressed itself on Sontag. She "would turn lovers into parents," he suggests, as if this reading were original. (Sontag admits as much in her diaries.) He diagnoses her as having a Cluster B personality disorder, whose symptoms include "fears of abandonment and feelings of inconsolable loneliness, which trigger frantic neediness." The more clinically Moser tries to pin down Sontag's inner life, the more it wriggles away from him.

"She warned against the mystifications of photographs and portraits: including those of biographers," Moser writes in the closing sentence of *Sontag: Her Life and Work*. It's hard to know how to read the line. Is Moser asking for our understanding, given the inherent limitations of biography as a genre? All biographies are, to an extent, mystifications. But some methods of reading and writing can resurrect the dead not as a series of tedious oppositions, but as flesh-and-blood individuals animated by their commitments to their ideas. What this would require is more sensitive probing of human contradictions than Moser has yet mastered.

THE BEST ANSWER to the question I opened with—why do we want and need a Susan Sontag?—comes from the literary critic Deborah Nelson's fantastic 2017 book, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*. In Nelson's view, Sontag's thoughts on art and modernity are neither original nor systematic. What is enchanting about her writing is her style: an associative and aphoristic approach to

The art she championed, and the art she made, valued the eternal postponement of emotional involvement.



SONTAG:
HER LIFE AND WORK
BENJAMIN MOSER
Ecco

talking about, or around, intense emotions without indulging in them. "An aphorism is not an argument; it is too well-bred for that," Sontag wrote in her diary—a glimpse of how her style served as an exercise in emotional self-regulation, in modeling aesthetic decorum. Her essays aspired to teach her readers how to "*feel* more sensually" as "the antidote to feeling too much or too little emotion," Nelson writes, offering a more nuanced reading than Moser does of Sontag's desire "to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more."

"She was Athena, not Aphrodite," Moser suggests, a comparison that is instructive for understanding Sontag's place in a long lineage of female archetypes that make our attraction to a figure like her legible. In Greek mythology, Athena was the favorite daughter of Zeus, the child born from his forehead. She caused her tyrannical father such pain that he had his head cleaved open. Out she sprang, armor-plated and golden, imperishable, eager to counsel mortal men against foolishness and vulgarity, to teach them the virtues of self-control and courage. Sontag, too, distrusted immoderation, preferring instead "coolness," "distance," "disinterestedness and impartiality" when such responses were most necessary—when the subject matter was hardest to bear. The art she championed, and the art she made, valued the eternal postponement of emotional involvement, the containment of soft Aphrodite's passions in a brisk, impersonal prose.

Where Moser perceives a striking, irreconcilable gap between Sontag's private and public selves, Nelson finds a dialectical unity. Sontag's embrace of a cool aesthetic intelligence is all the fiercer for her personal experiences of desire and distress; her style is a critical rejection of the "Romantic drama of individuality, emotional intensity, and powerlessness" that she was living. Nelson refers to this as "disciplined self-transcendence," and it is, I suspect, the source of both Sontag's productivity and her appeal—an appeal that far outstrips her physical appearance. There is something mesmerizing about the lifelong performance of discipline, something beautiful about the artifice required to exercise control over one's turbulent or painful inner life. What we are attracted to in Sontag is the idea of a woman whose writing can induct readers into a style of feeling, of attachment, of vulnerability, while also appearing to refuse those feelings, those attachments, that vulnerability, for herself—a woman who wears her armor exactly where it was meant to be worn, on her sleeve. **A**

Merve Emre is an associate professor of English at the University of Oxford. She is the author, most recently, of *The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing*.

CHANGEMAKERS ARE EVERYWHERE IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO LOOK. ASHOKA DOES.

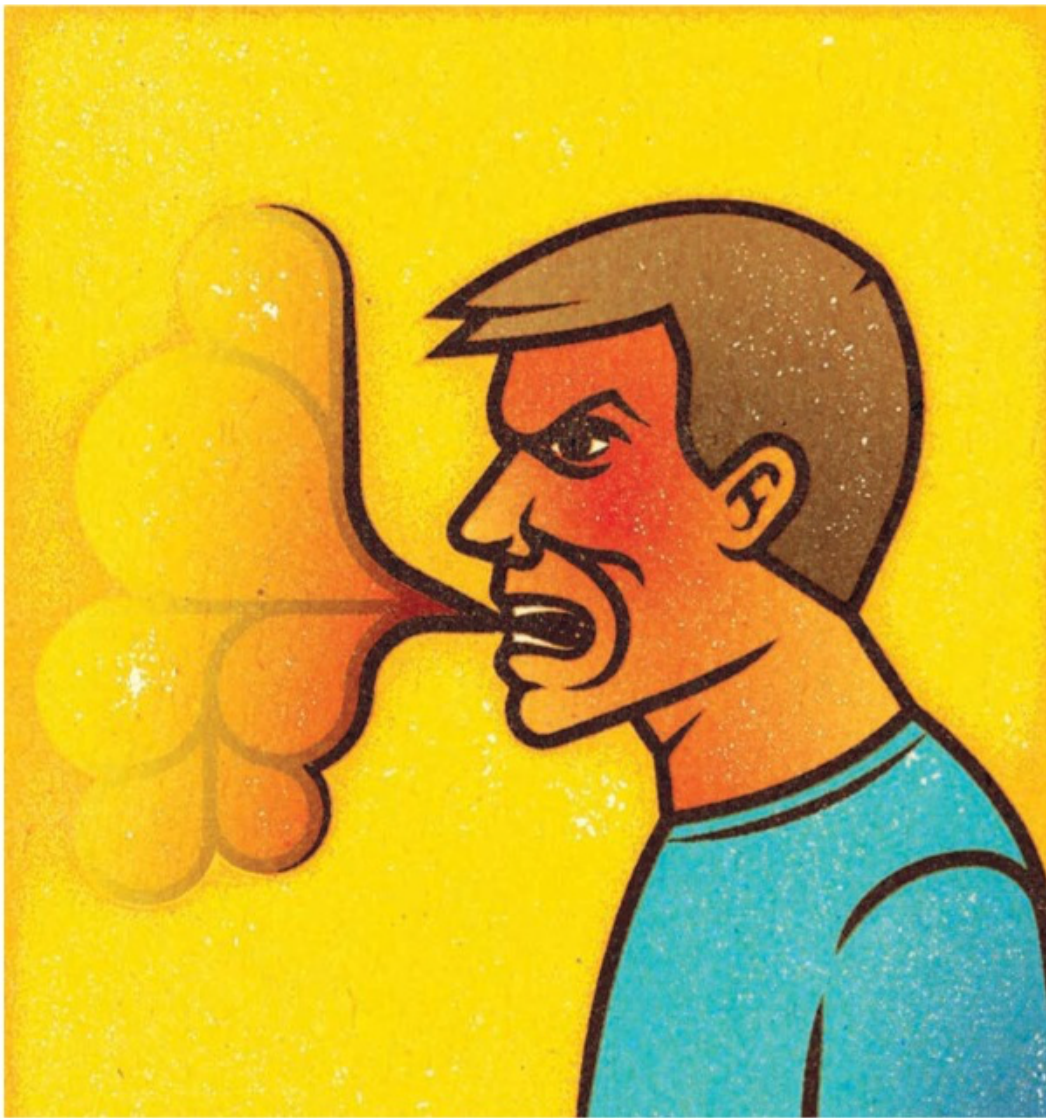
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BOOKS

Boy, Uninterrupted

Ben Lerner, portraitist of talkative men, explores the roots of white male rage.

BY JORDAN KISNER

THE TOPEKA SCHOOL, Ben Lerner's third novel, begins with a self-aware joke. Adam Gordon, Lerner's protagonist—who also narrates Lerner's acclaimed first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*—is sitting in a boat, talking. He's 17, a speech-and-debate whiz and an aspiring poet living in Topeka, Kansas. It's the middle of the night and he's with his girlfriend, Amber, monologuing passionately about something or other, when he suddenly looks around and realizes that he's sitting in the boat alone. She has jumped overboard and swum away, and he didn't even notice.

Men talking—specifically young white male poets from Kansas talking—have been a fixture of Lerner's novels. Lerner, a white male poet from Kansas,

even gave the name Ben to the narrator of his second novel, *10:04*, in addition to endowing him with roughly his own biography. Both earlier books feature the interior monologues and exterior dealings of Lerner-types. Both are also ironic, formally experimental, skeptical of their narrators while deeply enmeshed in their particular way of seeing the world. And both books are beautifully, exasperatingly, transcendently wordy. In *Atocha Station*, an extremely stoned Adam—again monologuing—marvels, before passing out, at “language becoming the experience it described.” In *10:04*, Ben is the kind of guy who admits that he cried on a park bench by referring to “a mild lacrimal event.”

So it is funny and welcome to open *The Topeka School* and find Adam talking so fluently and intently that he doesn't notice his girlfriend's escape. The scene signals a return of familiar themes in Lerner's work—an obsession with language, a particular genus of American male subjectivity—and signals that he is confronting these subjects in a more direct and critical way. *The Topeka School* trains the reader's eye on the dramas and dangers of being a person—or a nation—enthralled, bombarded, and imprisoned by rhetoric.

One of the hallmarks of Lerner's fiction is the way that it brings a single consciousness into collision with broad sociopolitical movements. The backdrop of *Atocha Station* is the Iraq War, already souring globalism, America in decline. In *10:04*, it is Occupy Wall Street, Hurricane Sandy, and growing questions in the Obama years about whether an American “we,” in a Whitmanesque sense, is still possible. In *The Topeka School*, Lerner writes from the vantage of 2019, and from the premise that the collective is broken and common discourse has been derailed. The implicit bid of the book is that exploring myopic white male monologuists, simmering with rage in the Midwest in the late 1990s, might shed light on today's America.

The main action of *The Topeka School* takes place during Adam's final year of high school, in 1997. He is the son of two psychologists, Jonathan and Jane, who are members of a famous psychoanalytic institute called the Foundation, something like a “Mayo Clinic for the mind.” Jane's research—which remains vague but concerns romantic relationships—has made her nationally famous. (Lerner's mother, Harriet Lerner, a clinical psychologist, rose to national prominence after writing a book about women's anger that sold millions of copies.) Jonathan is a therapist primarily for disaffected young white men of privilege, teenagers who seem to have everything but who suddenly turn angry, sullen, withdrawn, violent. Jonathan calls them the “lost boys.”

Adam isn't one of those boys, but he straddles two ways of being. He is part of the hyper-intellectual, Freudian world of his parents, where



the most successful men think calmly and talk calmly, where emotions require verbal “processing,” and where any adolescent outbursts are followed by “think[ing] along with” his parents about the causes. At the same time, he is immersed in the teenage masculinity of late-’90s Topeka; among his peers, the most expressible emotions are rage or disdain, and the lingua franca is physical violence or torrents of freestyle rap in an absurd—if earnest—appropriation of a black culture they have no direct contact with.

At school, Adam falls in with the kids of the Foundation faculty; the boys among them have a tense and violent relationship with the sons of blue-collar Topekans. The estrangement of these two groups prefigures the elite-versus-real-America animosity that now dominates political and social rhetoric—though what’s striking is how similarly angry and anxious about the demands of masculinity all these young white men seem. Adam often feels lost and enraged for reasons he can’t quite explain. His behavior at home grows so explosive that his parents insist he either see a therapist or learn biofeedback methods for regulating his emotions. He opts for the biofeedback.

For the most part, Adam navigates both worlds reasonably well, verbal virtuoso that he is, a state debate champion. He can deploy “his Foundation vocabulary” and freestyle rap with fluidity and abandon, words “unfold[ing] at a speed he could not consciously control.” Adam is especially gifted at extemporaneous argument, which has become his way of aggressively dominating others. His rages at his parents often take the form of “an overwhelming barrage of ridiculous but somehow irrefutable arguments,” and his attitude during interscholastic tournaments is competitive to the point of maliciousness. At the same time, debate is a route to the flow state he craves:

He passed, as he often passed, a mysterious threshold. He began to feel less like he was delivering a speech and more like a speech was delivering him, that the rhythm and intonation of his presentation were beginning to dictate its content, that he no longer had to organize his arguments so much as let them flow through him.

Again and again in *The Topeka School*, characters fall into a kind of glossolalia, or “word salad,” the breakdown of grammar commonly observed in religious rapture or extreme states of psychosis. Glossolalia is either pure communication, the presence of the divine in language, or terrible babble, the impulse to be understood and to understand pushed to the point of implosion. Adam trains for the national speech-and-debate tournament with a former champion also from Topeka, Peter Evanson, who is even better at verbal combat than

His rants at his parents often take the form of “an overwhelming barrage of ridiculous but somehow irrefutable arguments.”



THE TOPEKA SCHOOL
BEN LERNER
FSG

Adam—and who will later “be a key architect of the most right-wing governorship Kansas has ever known ... an important model for the Trump administration.” He is a master of what’s called “the spread,” or the act of making arguments and jamming in facts at such an unintelligibly fast pace that an opponent can’t possibly respond to them all effectively. In his lessons for Adam, we see the beginnings of a national political glossolalia:

I want quick swerves into the folksy ... After you go off about a treaty regulating drilling in the Arctic: “Now, in Kansas, we wouldn’t shake on that.” I don’t care if they’re not real sayings, just deliver them like they’re tried-and-true. Say “tried and true.” Say “ain’t” if you want. You can go agrammatical so long as they know it’s a choice, that it’s in quotes. Interrupt your highbrow fluency with bland sound bites of regional decency ... Deliver little tautologies like they’re proverbs.

Looking back on a scene of himself sparring with Evanson, the older Adam—now a writer living in New York—comments that the younger Adam will go on to “attempt this genealogy of his speech, its theaters and extremes,” referring to the book we are reading. If the novel is a chronicle of his coming-of-age in language, the suggestion is that it is also a larger semantic origin story, about faux-populist, frenetic Trumpian rhetoric, and the subset of articulate, angry men who helped cultivate it.

But why are these men so angry? Like Jonathan’s “lost boys,” they seem to have plenty of advantages—so what is the rage about? In the book, a Foundation analyst offers an explanation:

[Men are told] that they are individuals, rugged even, but in fact they are emptied out, isolate, mass men without a mass, although they’re not men, obviously, but boys, perpetual boys, Peter Pans, man-children, since America is adolescence without end, boys without religion on the one hand or a charismatic leader on the other; they don’t even have a father—President Carter!—to kill or a father to tell them to kill the Jew; they have no Jew; they are libidinally driven to mass surrender without anything to surrender to; they don’t even believe in money or in science, or those beliefs are insufficient; their country has fought and lost its last real war; in a word, they are overfed; in a word, they are starving.

This diagnosis is compelling but unsatisfying, partly because it ignores how *directed* white male rage is: It has targets, and those targets bespeak something more than godlessness or hunger or existential emptiness. They betray anxiety—anxiety about power. After Amber jumps out of the boat and swims away at the beginning of the



novel, Adam looks for her frantically, stumbling through a community of lake houses so uncannily identical that he accidentally lets himself into the wrong home, thinking it's Amber's. He's frightened, and when he eventually finds her, he's furious. She doesn't apologize for scaring him. Instead, she recounts a story about how her stepfather used to talk so endlessly at dinner that she once just slipped under the table and crawled off into the kitchen, where her mother was doing dishes. The two women looked at each other and then stood together in the doorway, watching him talking with vigor to an empty room. It's funny, but the humor vanishes when Amber describes what happened when her stepfather turned around:

He looks at my chair then back at us and now my mom and I start really cracking up. Then he gets this fucked-up smile that's pure rage. Like how dare you cunts laugh at me. But I give him the stepdaughter smile back and hold it, hold it. We basically have a staring contest and my mom's laughter gets all nervous until finally his face relaxes and it's all a big joke.

YOUNG ADAM DOESN'T understand why she's telling him this story, but Lerner makes the connection explicit. Though Adam is sensitive and well intentioned, he exists on a spectrum of men who use language not to communicate or connect, but to indulge in ecstatic solipsism, or to effectively erase the person they're addressing. When they are challenged, they explode. Throughout the novel, the women who love them gently try to persuade them to slow down, make sense, and shut up, with little lasting effect. Adam's mother, Jane, receives phone calls from male anti-fans, angry about some feminist element in her books. They empty streams of abuse and death threats into the phone until she interrupts them in an innocent tone to say the connection is bad; could they please speak up? Can they say that again, but louder? She prods "the Men" until they're shouting or, unwilling to shout, forced to hang up. It works for the moment, but then more men call. The male vitriol seems inexorable.

In *The Topeka School*, women are neither geniuses of language nor abusers of it in the manner of men. They are often better, more profound communicators (with her books, Jane reaches more people than any other character does), but they exist here as men's linguistic and emotional foils. The working class, too, seems mostly tangential: The anger of midwestern, educated, middle-class men and their blue-collar counterparts blurs together, even if it's expressed in different vocabularies. Race goes largely unexplored, other than that all of these Kansan teenagers like to rap and make gang signs, believing that they're

expressing their alienation in a way that is somehow powerful and dangerous. Teenage Adam thinks that the era of white men's dominance is passing, but the "genealogy" he writes—and the world he lives in—as an adult indicates that this hasn't happened.

Lerner seems interested in reiterating via the details of his own biography the now-evident political reality that these alienated men are powerful and dangerous precisely when they feel they are not. Even in Adam—a relatively sensitive poet, who nominally embraces feminism and prides himself on being the only boy he knows who studiously performs oral sex on his girlfriend—we see threatened white masculinity deploying whatever language is at its disposal to reclaim the ascendancy it believes is its birthright. The words may be stolen from Tupac or funneled through poetry, "spread" in extemporaneous argument, shouted in a blind rage, or completely nonsensical. Even when babbling (Adam's and Jonathan's mode during panic attacks or flights of fancy) or intentionally dissembling (Evanson's debate specialty), the men dominate the spaces they occupy. It seems sort of ridiculous until you remember the specter haunting this book, an extemporaneous wonder whose incoherent babbling serves to dissemble, deceive, distract. In America, Lerner reminds us, you can sound like an idiot all you want, but if you master the spread, you rule. **A**

Jordan Kisner is a writer in New York City.



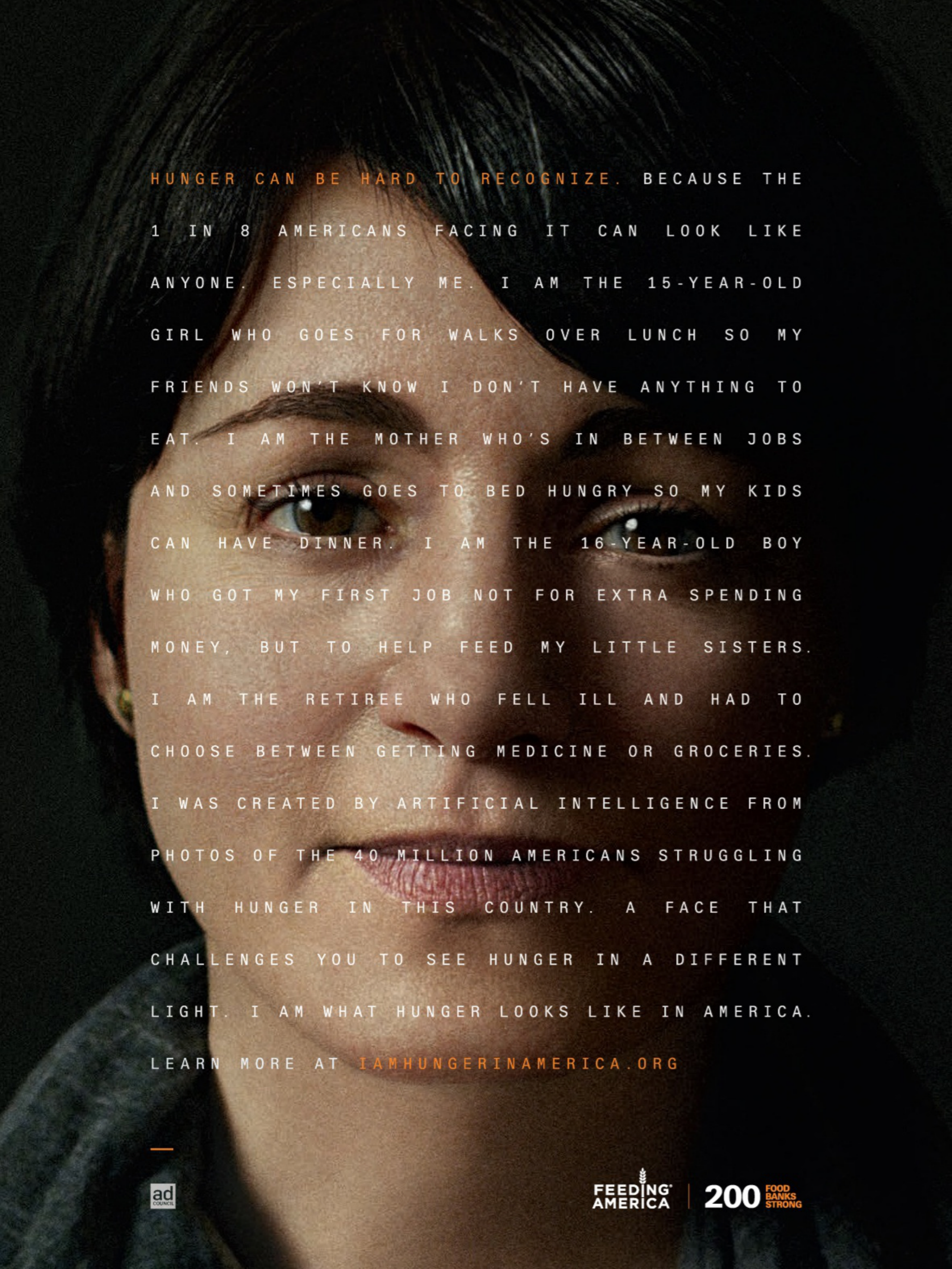
Stanley Plumly (1939–2019) was the author of numerous books of poetry and prose, including *Against Sunset* (2016) and *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (2008). His posthumous collection, *Middle Distance*, will be published next year.

BLUEBIRD

The house was strange, even for a summer house, cold somehow, the wraparound screened porch almost cut off by the trees, though the trees, off and on, would come alive with bluebirds, birds so tame, they would follow on the mountain path down to the small home lake, *chur-wi, tru-ly, chur-wi, tru-ly*, over and over, in bird-English.

Had I ever seen a bluebird so bright a blue?—a blue easily confused with happiness. I didn't even know a bluebird was a thrush. I knew and loved you, that was enough. These blues, as you called them, were yours: They seemed to fly in and out of your hands. The lake was one of those mirrorlike lakes. And the house was yours.

—Stanley Plumly



HUNGER CAN BE HARD TO RECOGNIZE. BECAUSE THE
1 IN 8 AMERICANS FACING IT CAN LOOK LIKE
ANYONE. ESPECIALLY ME. I AM THE 15-YEAR-OLD
GIRL WHO GOES FOR WALKS OVER LUNCH SO MY
FRIENDS WON'T KNOW I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO
EAT. I AM THE MOTHER WHO'S IN BETWEEN JOBS
AND SOMETIMES GOES TO BED HUNGRY SO MY KIDS
CAN HAVE DINNER. I AM THE 16-YEAR-OLD BOY
WHO GOT MY FIRST JOB NOT FOR EXTRA SPENDING
MONEY, BUT TO HELP FEED MY LITTLE SISTERS.
I AM THE RETIREE WHO FELL ILL AND HAD TO
CHOOSE BETWEEN GETTING MEDICINE OR GROCERIES.
I WAS CREATED BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FROM
PHOTOS OF THE 40 MILLION AMERICANS STRUGGLING
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The Secret Power of Menopause

The end of fertility doesn't mark the start of decline.

BY LIZA MUNDY

DON'T TRY TO TELL THIS to a mother sitting in the bleachers during a four-hour swim meet; or enduring a birthday party involving toddlers and craft projects; or resting in an armchair on a peaceful evening, savoring the heft of a tiny body and the scent of an infant's freshly washed hair. Interminable or sweetly languid though they may feel in the moment, the childbearing years are startlingly brief. Fertility, which typically ends in a woman's mid-40s, occupies less than half of her adult life. And then, if she's lucky, she has 30 or 40 years in which to do something else.

Most people don't realize how unusual humans are, in the way that non-reproductive females (how shall I put this?) persist. Females of most other species can bear young until they die, and many do, or at best enjoy a brief respite from breeding before death. This is true not only of creatures you might expect, such as rabbits, but also of long-lived mammals such as Asian elephants, and of primates such as gorillas and chimps. The odd exceptions—the Japanese aphid, for example, enters a “glue bomb” stage after her reproductive phase, ready to immobilize a colony intruder—only prove the rule.

The mystery of why women go on and on and on after their procreative function has ceased has occupied some of the great minds of the ages. I am sorry to report that many of those minds have not been forward-thinking. “It is a well-known fact ... that after women have lost their genital function their character often undergoes a peculiar alteration” and they become “quarrelsome, vexatious and overbearing,” Sigmund Freud pronounced. The male-dominated medical community of the mid-20th century was similarly dismissive. “The unpalatable truth must be faced that all postmenopausal women are castrates,” opined the gynecologist Robert Wilson, who elaborated on this theme in his 1966 best seller, *Feminine Forever*. The influential book, it later emerged, was backed by a pharmaceutical company eager to market hormone-replacement therapy.

Even the architects of the sexual revolution were fixated on fertility as a marker of femininity, an attitude that seems doubly unfair coming from the people who gave us the pill. “Once the ovaries stop, the very essence of being a woman stops,” wrote the psychiatrist David Reuben in 1969 in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask*, adding that the postmenopausal woman comes “as close as she can to being a man.” Or rather, “not really a man but no longer a functional woman.”

Little wonder that women writers have felt the need to weigh in over the centuries. A few took an upbeat approach. At the age of 41, having just given birth to her sixth child, the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote her friend Susan B. Anthony in 1857 to say that their best activist years lay ahead. “We shall not be in our prime before fifty & after that we shall be good for twenty years at least.” Others were less sanguine. At 54, writing her memoir, Simone de Beauvoir gloomily prepared to say “goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed”; women, Freud had taught her, become miserable and sexless as they age. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Helen Gurley Brown, Germaine Greer—all warily chronicled their maturity, as of course did the writer who invented the concept of “passage,” Gail Sheehy. Nora Ephron felt bad about her neck, and her anxiety spawned a best seller.

Even now it's hard for a woman not to dread the consequences of moving out of youth. One of the wryest recent meditations is an episode of *Inside Amy Schumer*, in which the eponymous comedian happens upon three of her comedic icons—Tina Fey, Patricia Arquette, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus—picnicking in a meadow. They are celebrating Louis-Dreyfus's “last fuckable day,” as adjudicated by the media, Fey explains. Schumer, feigning astonishment, asks whether the media do this to men. The trio laughs and laughs.

THREE NEW BOOKS about postmenopausal womanhood show that the conversation is changing. For the first time, *The New York Times* noted early this year, a sizable cohort of women is moving into the sixth and seventh decades of life with a surfeit of energy and workplace experience. Women are better educated than men. Many spend early middle age constrained by work-life challenges, like athletes training with ankle weights. Once the weights come off, they have the muscle to run. Literally: The 2020 slate of female presidential candidates is Exhibit A.

The landscape looks different due to the #MeToo movement as well. In some ways, it has divided women by generation, yet even older women who may regret a return to the idea of feminine fragility are overjoyed to see workplace predators toppled. The unseating of men like Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer has opened the way for women like Christiane Amanpour and Gayle King to occupy top spots, where they exemplify what 60-something really looks like: pretty freaking great.

The current conversation is also informed by evolutionary biology, which evaluates traits based on their reproductive purpose. Given that menopause is nonreproductive by definition, biologists consider it a “big evolutionary puzzle,” the novelist Darcey Steinke writes in her memoir, *Flash Count Diary: Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life*.



According to the prevailing view, a human female possesses all the eggs she will have while still in the womb; the number promptly begins diminishing, and by her mid-40s, the remaining ova have deteriorated. To an evolutionary biologist, this is interesting and weird. To Steinke, it was miserable and hard. Her book is lyrical but a bit depressing, because she herself was depressed.

Some women experience few symptoms during menopause, but Steinke suffered nearly two awful years of hot flashes, acute episodes that were like “four-minute surprise anxiety attacks.” She sensed mortality stalking her: “For the first time, I feel I have a time stamp, an expiration date.” She writes vividly and a little wistfully about sex, mourning her lost desirability, as she sees it, and the waning of her own desire. She feels angry; she yells at her husband. “Early times of sexual frenzy seem almost impossible now.”

Every woman is of course entitled to—can’t escape—her own response to menopause. But Steinke’s melancholy reflections sound a bit retrograde, as if she can’t escape those insufferable doctors, the Wilsons and the Reubens, with their pompous pronouncements about the wreckage that remains when estrogen, like a tide, drains away. “Without hormones my femininity is fraying,” she writes. In a transitional state herself, she identifies with people who are transitioning out of

their birth gender—not that the empathy brings much relief.

Steinke also identifies with one of the few other species that enjoy a long postmenopausal life: killer whales. In the ocean, nonreproductive females play an important role. With the wisdom of years, they guide their pod to the best salmon. Steinke kayaks in waters off the coast of Seattle, hoping to commune, and is rewarded with a magnificent breaching. “The wild matriarchs have given me hope,” she writes. “They are neither frail nor apprehensive, but in every way leaders of their communities.”

THAT MENOPAUSE MAY ENABLE a new role and stature for women is the central argument of *The Slow Moon Climbs: The Science, History, and Meaning of Menopause*, by Susan Mattern. A historian at the University of Georgia, she steps away from the personal to consider “humanity’s massive primeval past.” Once upon a time, scientists assumed that women (and men) were designed to live to about 50, and that menopause was an accident, a by-product of medical progress. Yet even in primitive societies, it turns out, a portion of women lived well past middle age, which suggests that menopause is a feature, not a bug, of human evolution.

Mattern has her own audacious theory as to why: Menopause is a key to our success as a species. In humanity’s hunter-gatherer days, tribes needed a balance of producers and consumers—people who brought in food, and people who ate it. Most adults did both. Not so children, who remain dependent during the long period of brain development. Members who could bring in food for more than one person without adding to the population were crucial.

Enter the postmenopausal female. The anthropologist Kristen Hawkes studied a modern foraging tribe, the Hadza, and found that an energetic group of older women brought “more food into camp than any other age and sex category.” This paved the way for the Grandmother Hypothesis: Not only do older women serve as food producers, but they are providers of “allocare,” communal child care. In the Hadza and other tribes, Mattern writes, women “reach peak foraging productivity in their 50s and continue to produce a caloric surplus through old age.” She points out that tribes have been known to kill members who can’t contribute. If grandmothers aren’t murdered, she reasons, that is because they are useful.

Mattern makes the case that menopause probably emerged in humans when we diverged from chimpanzees millions of years ago. It gave *Homo sapiens* an advantage over other species of hominids such as Neanderthals and Denisovans, she proposes. Limiting childbearing to younger women, whose offspring could be cared for by older women, enabled the species to bounce back from an



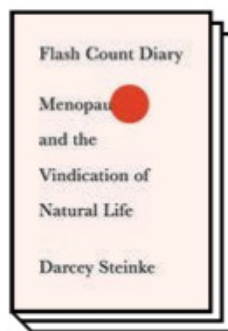


epidemic or a crisis: Those fertile women could reproduce quickly, but no woman could do so forever, sparing the tribe the risk of overpopulation. With the advent of farming, menopause still served an important purpose. The most prosperous time for a peasant family was postmenopausal, Mattern argues, when older children could help and the family no longer had new members to support. Nowadays, with fewer children and more resources, she brightly adds, “women past menopause, who historically used their energy surplus to help their families survive, can now use it in other ways.” While Steinke experienced menopause as a shutting-down, Mattern sees it as an opening-up.

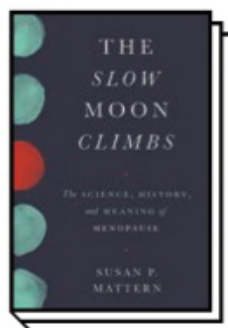
BOTH VIEWS ARE TRUE, as the *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins shows in *No Stopping Us Now: The Adventures of Older Women in American History*, which spans the colonial era to the present. Her takeaway is that older women fare well when circumstances permit them to be productive: “If you’re important economically, you’re important.” Providing allocare is well and good, but “eras in which older women were able to earn money or increase their family assets were eras in which they were ... popular,” Collins writes drily.

Tracing their shifting status, she observes that during the colonial period, women continued spinning, weaving, and the like into old age. Physically, of course, the stage could be hell—pelvic disorders, childbirth damage, rotting teeth. Older enslaved women were exiled and horribly neglected. Yet often, the only thing worse than being a woman was being a man: Male mortality was higher, and widowhood could be a blessing—widows, at least white ones, could own property (unlike married women). Then, as the country became more populated, men monopolized the jobs. Women had less of an economic purpose, and they lost status.

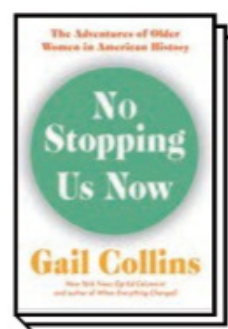
Collins highlights the great age of social reform in the mid-19th century as another period when older women enjoyed prestige, though less because they had economic power than because they wielded moral authority. Notably, they used that authority to make the case for, among other things, female clout well into later life. A standout among women’s-rights advocates, Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that women could occupy different spheres at different life stages, moving from narrow domestic concerns to community-minded platforms. Stanton, Collins writes, “believed that menopause had redirected all her ‘vital forces’ from her reproductive organs to her brain.” Vital she and Susan B. Anthony certainly were as they barnstormed the country, made speeches on tabletops, played cards with soldiers. Their age allowed them to “have adventures.” At the same time, one observer wrote, “stately Mrs. Stanton has secured much immunity by a comfortable look of motherliness.”



FLASH COUNT DIARY:
MENOPAUSE AND
THE VINDICATION OF
NATURAL LIFE
DARCEY STEINKE
FSG



THE SLOW MOON
CLIMBS: THE
SCIENCE, HISTORY,
AND MEANING OF
MENOPAUSE
SUSAN MATTERN
Princeton University Press



NO STOPPING US NOW:
THE ADVENTURES
OF OLDER WOMEN IN
AMERICAN HISTORY
GAIL COLLINS
Little, Brown

As the white-collar workplace expanded in the industrial era, women were shouldered out of it, eroding female social power across the age range. Older black women were a mainstay of early civil-rights struggles, but the contributions of activists such as Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune were sidelined, the credit given to younger men. And women’s return to the workforce during World War II gave way to postwar pressure to depart it, which delivered mixed results for older women. In the 1960s and ’70s, important strides were made thanks to female workers such as flight attendants, who filed class-action lawsuits protesting rules that obliged them to retire if they married or reached age 35. Yet as women’s earning potential grew along with their work span and sexual freedom, the more senior among them faced newly corrosive pressures.

It may not be a coincidence that Wilson, Reuben, and their ilk pushed the perils of “the menopause” during this era. The centrality of sexual liberty to the women’s movement arguably left second-wave feminists more vulnerable to insecurity about their bodies and looks. Susan Mattern proposes that the very concept of a menopausal syndrome was the invention of a culture that aimed to psychologically weaken women in a strong period of life—at a historical moment when female power was rising. “Dominant groups,” she observes, “can be very creative in inventing new ways of oppressing people.”

Yet I’m struck, reading these accounts, that Stanton intuited what remains true today: Women have a different life trajectory than men, and the place of menopause in it is liberating in a way that’s worth considering. To describe a passage of life, even a painful one, can itself be a form of empowerment. Men, too, feel loss and insecurity as they age, and perhaps could use a map of sorts themselves. Crossing the midlife point, many struggle to recalibrate professional ambition (as Arthur Brooks’s article in *The Atlantic*’s July issue revealed) and to build stronger social and intimate ties. Online-dating sites betray men’s own anxiety about physical decline (“My friends say I look much younger than 60!”) and suggest that many men are perfectly willing to date women across the age range. The sex books are right: Men aren’t as picky about women’s bodies as women fear. Men crave sex, but they also crave conversation, a partner with confidence and achievements. Even Simone de Beauvoir changed her mind. In *The Coming of Age*, a book about the experience of getting older, she wrote that she had crossed a “frontier” and found peace. She had also taken a younger lover. “It has been far less sombre,” she reported, “than I had foreseen.” **A**

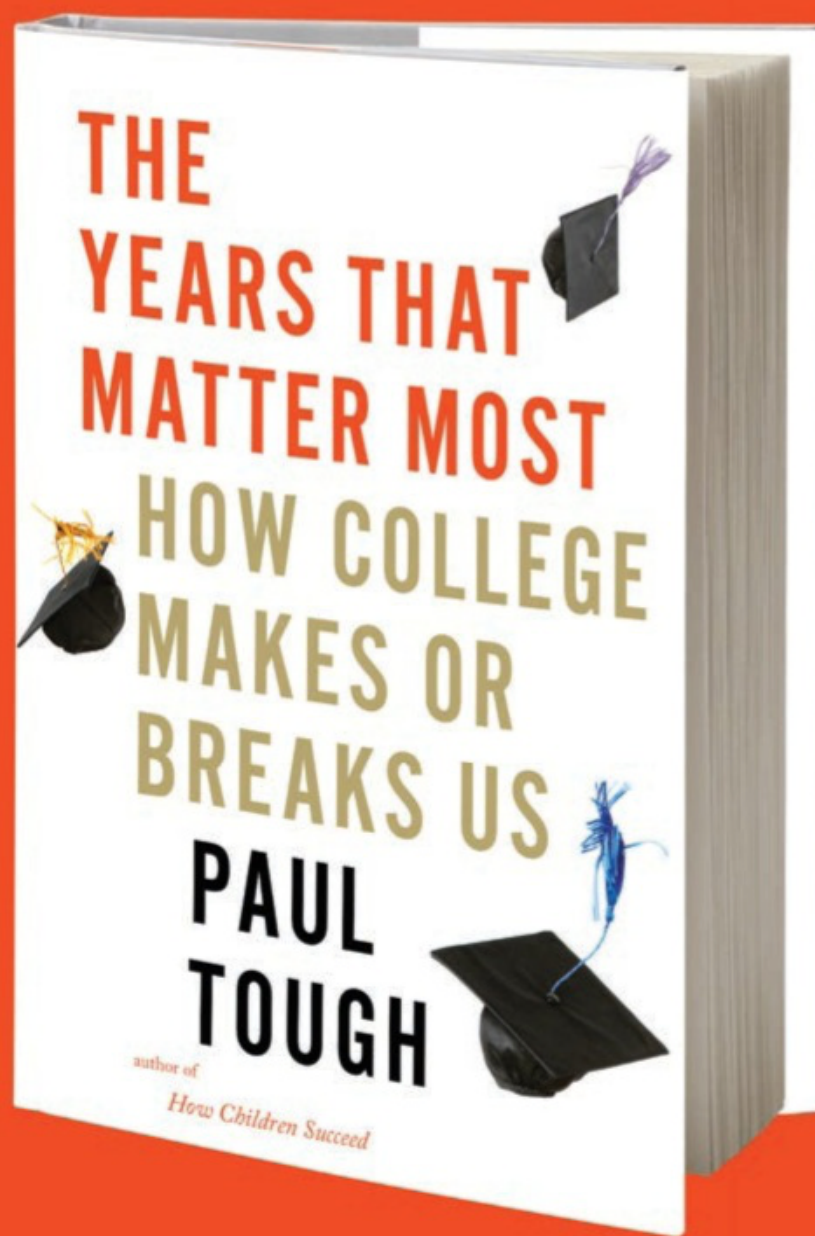
Liza Mundy is the author, most recently, of Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II. She is a senior fellow at New America.

“[*The Years That Matter Most*] should be necessary reading for every student, professor, administrator, and trustee in this country interested in what radical revision looks like.”

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—GEORGE PACKER,
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"I HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO LEAVE,"
GENERAL JAMES MATTIS SAYS OF
HIS DECISION TO RESIGN AS
PRESIDENT TRUMP'S
SECRETARY OF
DEFENSE.





PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK



N DECEMBER 19 of last year, Admiral Michael Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met James Mattis for lunch at the Pentagon. Mattis was a day away from resigning as Donald Trump's secretary of defense, but he tends to keep his own counsel, and he did not suggest to Mullen, his friend and former commander, that he was thinking of leaving.

But Mullen did think Mattis appeared unusually afflicted that day. Mattis often seemed burdened in his role. His aides and friends say he found the president to be of limited cognitive ability, and of generally dubious character. Now Mattis was becoming more and more isolated in the administration, especially since the defenestration of his closest Cabinet ally, the former secretary of state Rex Tillerson, several months earlier. Mattis and Tillerson had together smothered some of Trump's more extreme and imprudent ideas. But now Mattis was operating without cover. Trump was turning on him publicly; two months earlier, he had speculated that Mattis might be a Democrat and said, in reference to NATO, "I think I know more about it than he does." (Mattis, as a Marine general, once served as the supreme allied commander in charge of NATO transformation.)

Mullen told me recently that service in this administration comes with a unique set of hazards, and that Mattis was not unaware of these hazards. "I think back to his 'Hold the line' talk, the one that was captured on video," Mullen said, referring to an impromptu 2017 encounter between Mattis and U.S. troops stationed in Jordan that became a YouTube sensation. In the video, Mattis tells the soldiers, "Our country right now, it's got problems we don't have in the military. You just hold the line until our country gets back to understanding and respecting each other and showing it." Mullen said: "He obviously found himself in a challenging environment."

Mullen's concern for Mattis was shared by many other generals and admirals, active duty and retired, who worried that sustained exposure to Trump would destroy their friend, who is perhaps the most revered living marine. Mattis had maintained his dignity in perilous moments, even as his fellow Cabinet officials were relinquishing theirs. At a ritualized praise session at the White House in June 2017, as the vice president and other Cabinet members abased themselves before the president, Mattis would offer only this generic—but, given the circumstances, dissident—thought: "It's an honor to represent the men and women of the Department of Defense. We are grateful for the sacrifices our people are making in order to strengthen our military, so our diplomats always negotiate from a position of strength."

To some of his friends, though, Mattis was beginning to place his reputation at risk. He had, in the fall of 2018, acquiesced to Trump's deployment of troops to the U.S.-Mexico border, and he was becoming contemptuous of a Pentagon press corps that was trying to perform its duty in difficult circumstances.

By last December, Mattis was facing the most urgent crisis of his nearly two years in the Cabinet. Trump had just announced, contrary to his administration's stated policy, that he would withdraw all American troops from Syria, where they were fighting the Islamic State. This sudden (and ultimately reversed) policy shift posed a dire challenge to Mattis's beliefs. He had spent much of his career as a fighter in the Middle East. He had battled Islamist extremists and understood the danger they represented. He believed that a retreat from Syria would threaten the security of American troops elsewhere in the region, and would especially threaten America's allies in the anti-ISIS coalition. These allies would, in Mattis's view, feel justifiably betrayed by Trump's decision.

"I had no idea that he was on the precipice of resigning," Mullen told me. "But I know how strongly he believes in alliances. The practical reasons become moral reasons. Most of us believe that we've moved on as a country from being able to do it alone. We may have had dreams about this in 1992 or 1993, but we've moved on. We have to have friends and supporters. And we're talking about Jim Mattis. He's not going to change his view on this. He's not going to leave friends and allies on the battlefield."

That afternoon, Mattis called John Kelly, the former Marine general who was then nearing the end of his calamitous run as Trump's chief of staff. "I need an hour with the boss," Mattis said.

The next day, he met Trump in the Oval Office. Mattis made his case for keeping troops in Syria. Trump rejected his arguments. Thirty minutes into the conversation, Mattis told the president, "You're going to have to get the next secretary of defense to lose to ISIS. I'm not going to do it." He

handed Trump his resignation letter, a letter that would soon become one of the most famous documents of the Trump presidency thus far.

Here is where I am compelled to note that I did not learn any of these details from Mattis himself. Nor did I learn them from his new book, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*, which he wrote with the former Marine officer Bing West. The book is an instructive and entertaining leadership manual for executives, managers, and military officers. Mattis is a gifted storyteller, and his advice will be useful to anyone who runs anything. The book is not, however, an account of his time in service to the 45th president.

I've known Mattis for many years, and we spent several hours in conversation this summer, at his home in Richland, Washington, and at the Hoover Institution, on the campus of Stanford University. In these conversations, we discussed the qualities of effective leadership, the workings of command-and-feedback loops, the fragility of what he calls the American experiment, fishing the Columbia River, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, and many other topics. But about Trump he was mainly silent. I caught glimpses of anger and incredulity, to be sure. But Mattis is a disciplined man. While discipline is an admirable quality, in my conversations with Mattis I found it exasperating, because I believe that the American people should hear his answer to this question: Is Donald Trump fit for command?

He should answer the question well before November 3, 2020. Mattis is in an unparalleled position to provide a definitive answer. During moments of high tension with North Korea, he had worried that being out of reach of the president for more than a few seconds constituted a great risk. No one, with the possible exception of John Kelly, has a better understanding of Donald Trump's capacities and inclinations, particularly in the realm of national security, than James Mattis.

I made this argument to him during an interview at his home, a modest townhouse in a modest development in a modest town. Mattis, who is 69, is single, and has always been so. His house serves mainly as a library of the literature of war and diplomacy, and as a museum of ceremonial daggers, the residue of a lifetime of official visits to army headquarters across the Middle East. The decor reminded me of one of his sayings: "Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet."

I knew that this would be a Gallipoli of an interview, and that Mattis would be playing the role of the Ottoman gunners. But I had to try.

"When you go out on book tour," I said, "people are going to want you to say things you don't want to say." I mentioned a scene from the book, one that concerned an ultimately successful effort to untangle a traffic jam of armored vehicles in Iraq. I noted that while this story is an edifying case study in effective leadership, it is not necessarily the sort of story that people want from him right now.

"Yeah," he said.

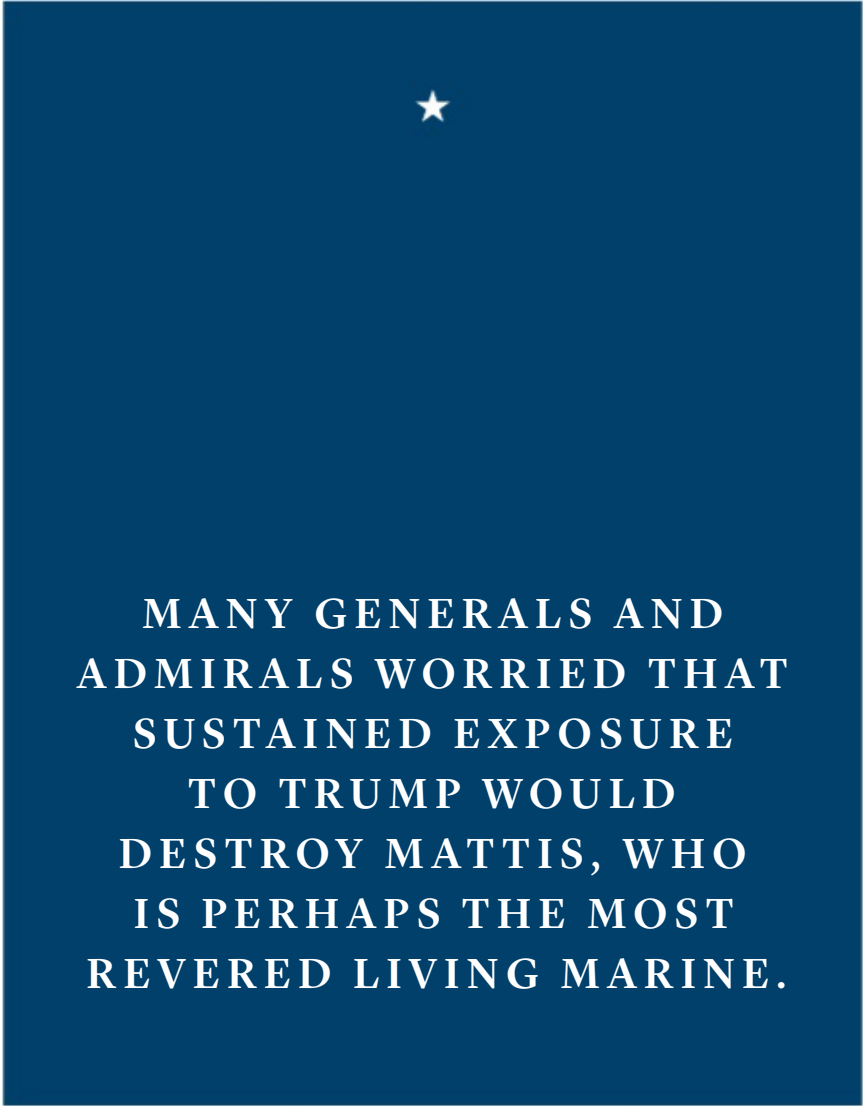
"You're prepared for that? For people wanting you to talk about Trump?"

He paused.

"Do you know the French concept of *devoir de réserve*?" he asked.

I did not, I said.

"The duty of silence. If you leave an administration, you owe some silence. When you leave an administration over clear policy differences, you need to give the people who are still there as



MANY GENERALS AND
ADMIRALS WORRIED THAT
SUSTAINED EXPOSURE
TO TRUMP WOULD
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IS PERHAPS THE MOST
REVERED LIVING MARINE.

much opportunity as possible to defend the country. They still have the responsibility of protecting this great big experiment of ours. I know the malevolence some people feel for this country, and we have to give the people who are protecting us some time to carry out their duties without me adding my criticism to the cacophony that is right now so poisonous."

"But duty manifests in other ways," I argued. "You have a First Amendment guarantee to speak your mind—"

"Absolutely."

"And don't you have a duty to warn the country if it is endangered by its leader?"

"I didn't cook up a convenient tradition here," he said. "You don't endanger the country by attacking the elected commander in chief. I may not like a commander in chief one fricking bit, but our system puts the commander in chief there, and to further weaken him when we're up against real threats—I mean, we could be at war on the Korean peninsula, every time they start launching something."

The subject of North Korea represented my best chance to wrench a direct answer from Mattis. I had collected some of Trump's more repellent tweets, and read aloud the one that I thought might overwhelm his defenses. It is a tweet almost without peer in the canon:

North Korea fired off some small weapons, which disturbed some of my people, and others, but not me. I have confidence that Chairman Kim will keep his promise to me, & also smiled when he called Swampman Joe Biden a low IQ individual, & worse. Perhaps that's sending me a signal?

Mattis looked at his hands. Finally he said, "Any Marine general or any other senior servant of the people of the United States



X General James Mattis, photographed in his office at Stanford University, June 10, 2019

would find that, to use a mild euphemism, counterproductive and beneath the dignity of the presidency.”

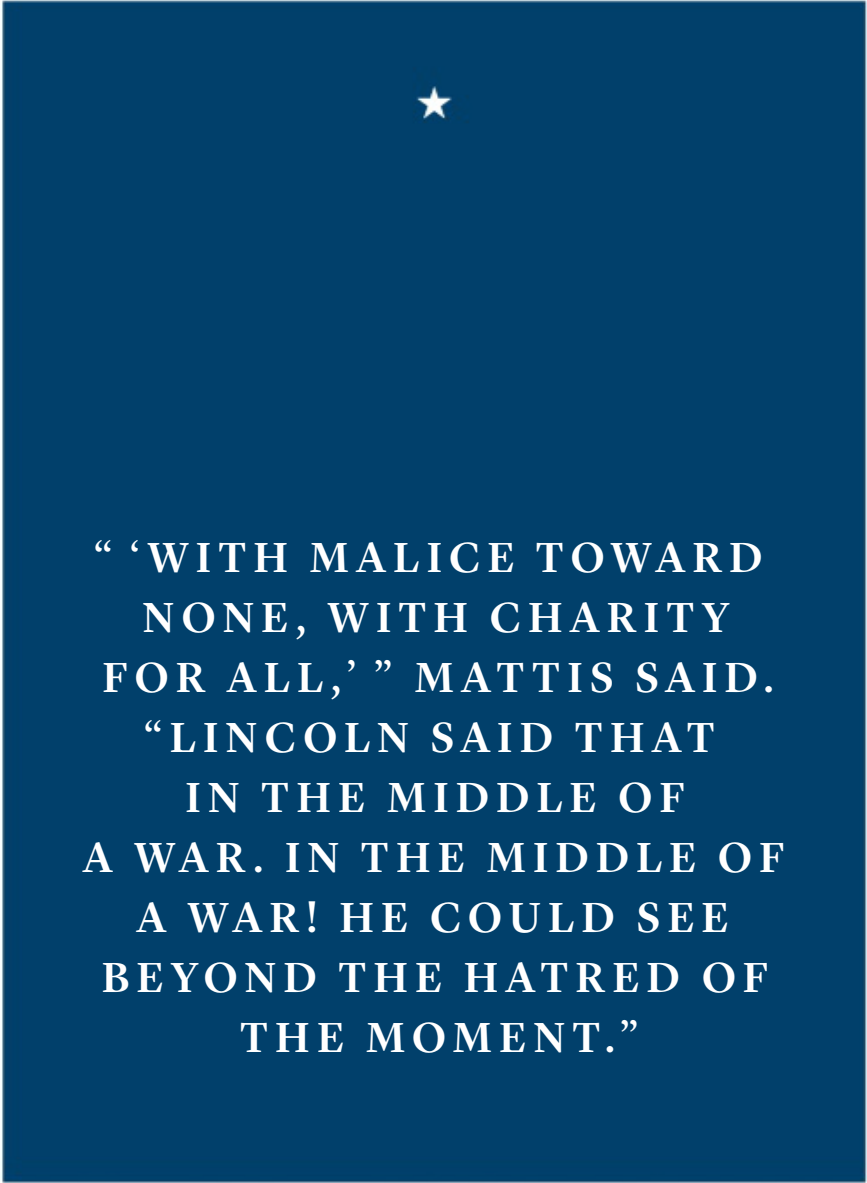
He went on, “Let me put it this way. I’ve written an entire book built on the principles of respecting your troops, respecting each other, respecting your allies. Isn’t it pretty obvious how I would feel about something like that?”

It is. When *Call Sign Chaos* is refracted through the prism of our hallucinatory political moment, it becomes something more than a primer for middle managers. The book is many things, apart from a meditation on leadership. It is the autobiography of a war fighter, and also an extended argument for a forceful, confident, alliance-centered U.S. foreign policy. Read another way, though, it is mainly a 100,000-word subtweet.

When I mentioned this notion to Mattis, he looked at me curiously. He is not closely acquainted with the language of social media. When I explained what a subtweet is, he said, “Well, you saw that my resignation letter is in the book.”

It comes near the end. Each chapter contains a lesson about personal leadership, or American leadership, or some combination of the two: “Coach and encourage, don’t berate, least of all in public.” “Public humiliation does not change our friends’ behavior or attitudes in a positive way.” “Operations occur at the speed of trust.” “Nations with allies thrive, and those without wither.” And then comes the resignation letter, a repudiation of a man who models none of Mattis’s principles:

While the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies ...



“ ‘WITH MALICE TOWARD
NONE, WITH CHARITY
FOR ALL,’ ” MATTIS SAID.
“LINCOLN SAID THAT
IN THE MIDDLE OF
A WAR. IN THE MIDDLE OF
A WAR! HE COULD SEE
BEYOND THE HATRED OF
THE MOMENT.”

My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear-eyed about both malign actors and strategic competitors are strongly held and informed by over four decades of immersion in these issues. We must do everything possible to advance an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values, and we are strengthened in this effort by the solidarity of our alliances.

Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position.

“I had no choice but to leave,” he told me. “That’s why the letter is in the book. I want people to understand why I couldn’t stay. I’ve been informed by four decades of experience, and I just couldn’t connect the dots anymore.”

Later, during a long walk along the Columbia River, I gave it another go, asking him to describe in broad terms the nature of Trump’s leadership abilities. “I’m happy to talk about leadership,” he said. “My model—one of my models—is George Washington. Washington’s idea of leadership was that first you listen, then you learn, then you help, and only then do you lead. It is a somewhat boring progression, but it’s useful. What you try to do in that learning phase is find common ground.”

“So on one end of the spectrum is George Washington, and at the other end is Donald Trump?”

Mattis smiled. “It’s a beautiful river, isn’t it?” he said. “I used to swim it all the time when I was a kid. Strong current.”

I **N MID-AUGUST** I checked in with Mattis, to see whether events over the summer—Trump’s attack on four congresswomen of color; his attack on Representative Elijah Cummings; his attacks on other minorities; his endorsement-by-tweet of the North Korean dictator’s “great and beautiful vision” for his country; the El Paso massacre, conducted by a white supremacist whose words echoed those often used by Trump and his supporters when discussing immigration—might have led him to reconsider his decorous approach to public criticism of the president.

About El Paso he said: “You know, on that day we were all Hispanics. That’s the way we have to think about this. If it happens to any one of us, it happens to all of us.”

But about this treacherous political moment?

“You’ve got to avoid looking at what’s happening in isolation from everything else,” he said. “We can’t hold what Trump is doing in isolation. We’ve got to address the things that put him there in the first place.” Mattis speaks often about affection: the affection that commanders feel for their soldiers, and that soldiers ought to feel for one another—and the affection that Americans should feel for one another and for their country but often, these days, don’t. “‘With malice toward none, with charity for all,’” he said. “Lincoln said that in the middle of a war. In the middle of a war! He could see beyond the hatred of the moment.”

I thought back to what he’d told me earlier in the summer, when I had asked him to describe something Trump could say or do that would trigger him to launch a frontal attack on the president. He’d demurred, as I had expected. But then he’d issued a caveat: “There is a period in which I owe my silence. It’s not eternal. It’s not going to be forever.” **A**

Jeffrey Goldberg is the editor in chief of The Atlantic.



A man and a woman are standing on a cobblestone path in Paris, kissing. The man is wearing a dark blue and green plaid Balenciaga tracksuit and black Chelsea boots with the Balenciaga logo. The woman is wearing a grey Balenciaga dress with a high collar and a matching grey bag with a large buckle. She is also wearing black tights and black pointed-toe shoes with the Balenciaga logo. They are standing in front of a stone wall and a bench, with a bridge and buildings in the background.

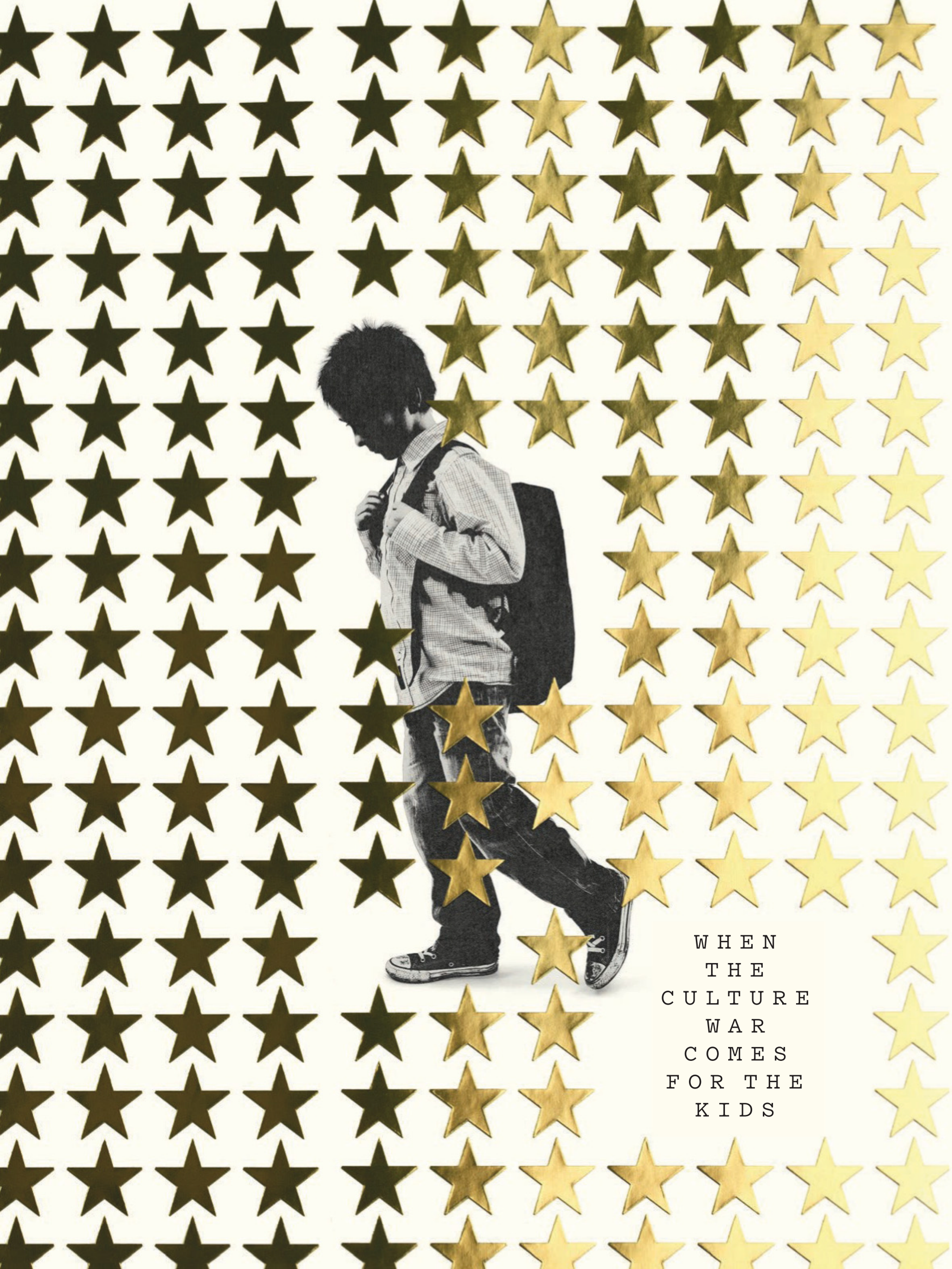
BALENCIAGA



CAUGHT BETWEEN A BRUTAL MERITOCRACY
AND A RADICAL NEW PROGRESSIVISM, A PARENT
TRIES TO DO RIGHT BY HIS CHILDREN WHILE
NAVIGATING NEW YORK CITY'S SCHOOLS.

BY
GEORGE PACKER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL SPELLA



WHEN
THE
CULTURE
WAR
COMES
FOR THE
KIDS



1.

TO BE A PARENT IS TO BE COMPROMISED. You pledge allegiance to justice for all, you swear that private attachments can rhyme with the public good, but when the choice comes down to your child or an abstraction—even the well-being of children you don’t know—you’ll betray your principles to the fierce unfairness of love. Then life takes revenge on the conceit that your child’s fate lies in your hands at all. The organized pathologies of adults, including yours—sometimes known as politics—find a way to infect the world of children. Only they can save themselves.

Our son underwent his first school interview soon after turning 2. He’d been using words for about a year. An admissions officer at a private school with brand-new, beautifully and sustainably constructed art and dance studios gave him a piece of paper and crayons. While she questioned my wife and me about our work, our son drew a yellow circle over a green squiggle.

Rather coolly, the admissions officer asked him what it was. “The moon,” he said. He had picked this moment to render his very first representational drawing, and our hopes rose. But her jaw was locked in an icy and inscrutable smile.

Later, at a crowded open house for prospective families, a hedge-fund manager from a former Soviet republic told me about a good public school in the area that accepted a high percentage of children with disabilities. As insurance against private school, he was planning to grab a spot at this public school by gaming the special-needs system—which, he added, wasn’t hard to do.

Wanting to distance myself from this scheme, I waved my hand at the roomful of parents desperate to cough up \$30,000 for preschool and said, “It’s all a scam.” I meant the whole business of basing admissions on interviews with 2-year-olds. The hedge-fund manager pointed out that if he reported my words to the admissions officer, he’d have one less competitor to worry about.

When the rejection letter arrived, I took it hard as a comment on our son, until my wife informed me that the woman with the frozen smile had actually been interviewing *us*. We were the ones who’d been rejected. We consoled ourselves that the school wasn’t right for our family, or we for it. It was a school for amoral finance people.

At a second private school, my wife watched intently with other parents behind a one-way mirror as our son engaged in group play with other toddlers, their lives secured or ruined by every share or shove. He was put on the wait list.

The system that dominates our waking hours, commands our unthinking devotion, and drives us, like orthodox followers of an exacting faith, to extraordinary, even absurd feats of exertion, is not democracy, which often seems remote and fragile. It’s meritocracy—the system that claims to reward talent and effort with a top-notch education and a well-paid profession, its code of rigorous practice and generous blessings passed down from generation to generation. The pressure of meritocracy made us apply to private schools when our son was 2—not because we wanted him to attend private preschool, but because, in New York City, where we live, getting him into a good public kindergarten later on would be even harder, and if we failed, by that point most of the private-school slots would be filled. As friends who’d started months earlier warned us, we were already behind the curve by the time he drew his picture of the moon. We were maximizing options—hedging, like the finance guy, like many families we knew—already tracing the long line that would lead to the horizon of our son’s future.

The mood of meritocracy is anxiety—the low-grade panic when you show up a few minutes late and all the seats are taken. New York City, with its dense population, stratified social ladder, and general pushiness, holds a fun-house mirror up to meritocracy. Only New York would force me to wake up early one Saturday morning in February, put on my parka and wool hat, and walk half a mile in the predawn darkness to register our son, then

just 17 months old, for nursery school. I arrived to find myself, at best, the 30th person in a line that led from the locked front door of the school up the sidewalk. Registration was still two hours off, and places would be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. At the front of the line, parents were lying in sleeping bags. They had spent the night outside.

I stood waiting in the cold with a strange mix of feelings. I hated the hypercompetitive parents who made everyone's life more tense. I feared that I'd cheated our son of a slot by not rising until the selfish hour of 5:30. And I worried that we were all bound together in a mad, heroic project that we could neither escape nor understand, driven by supreme devotion to our own child's future. All for a nursery school called Huggs.

New York's distortions let you see the workings of meritocracy in vivid extremes. But the system itself—structured on the belief that, unlike in a collectivized society, individual achievement should be the basis for rewards, and that, unlike in an inherited aristocracy, those rewards must be earned again by each new generation—is all-American. True meritocracy came closest to realization with the rise of standardized tests in the 1950s, the civil-rights movement, and the opening of Ivy League universities to the best and brightest, including women and minorities. A great broadening of opportunity followed. But in recent decades, the system has hardened into a new class structure in which professionals pass on their money, connections, ambitions, and work ethic to their children, while less educated families fall further behind, with little chance of seeing their children move up.

When parents on the fortunate ledge of this chasm gaze down, vertigo stuns them. Far below they see a dim world of processed food, obesity, divorce, addiction, online-education scams, stagnant wages, outsourcing, rising morbidity rates—and they pledge to do whatever they can to keep their children from falling. They'll stay married, cook organic family meals, read aloud at bedtime every night, take out a crushing mortgage on a house in a highly rated school district, pay for music teachers and test-prep tutors, and donate repeatedly to over-endowed alumni funds. The battle to get their children a place near the front of the line begins before conception and continues well into their kids' adult lives. At the root of all this is inequality—and inequality produces a host of morbid symptoms, including a frantic scramble for status among members of a professional class whose most prized acquisition is not a Mercedes plug-in hybrid SUV or a family safari to Maasai Mara but an acceptance letter from a university with a top-10 *U.S. News & World Report* ranking.

In his new book, *The Meritocracy Trap*, the Yale Law professor Daniel Markovits argues that this system turns elite families into business enterprises, and children into overworked, inauthentic success machines, while producing an economy that favors the super-educated and blights the prospects of the middle class, which sinks toward the languishing poor. Markovits describes the immense investments in money and time that well-off couples make in their children. By kindergarten, the children of elite professionals are already a full two years ahead of middle-class children, and the achievement gap is almost unbridgeable.

On that freezing sidewalk, I felt a shudder of revulsion at the perversions of meritocracy. And yet there I was, cursing myself for being 30th in line.

2.

NOT LONG AFTER he drew the picture of the moon, our son was interviewed at another private school, one of the most highly coveted in New York. It was the end of 2009, early in President Barack Obama's first term, and the teachers were wearing brightly colored HOPE pendants that they had crafted with their preschoolers. I suppressed disapproval of the partisan display (what if the face hanging from the teachers' necks were Sarah Palin's?) and reassured myself that the school had artistic and progressive values. It recruited the children of writers and other "creatives." And our son's monitored group play was successful. He was accepted.

The school had delicious attributes. Two teachers in each class of 15 children; parents who were concert pianists or playwrights, not just investment bankers; the prospect later on of classes in Latin, poetry writing, puppetry, math theory, taught by passionate scholars. Once in, unless a kid seriously messed up, he faced little chance of ever having to leave, until, 15 years on, the school matched its graduates with top universities where it had close relations with admissions offices. Students wouldn't have to endure the repeated trauma of applying to middle and high schools that New York forces on public-school children. Our son had a place near the very front of the line,

shielded from the meritocracy at its most ruthless. There was only one competition, and he had already prevailed, in monitored group play.

Two years later we transferred him to a public kindergarten.

We had just had our second child, a girl. The private school was about to start raising its fee steeply every year into the indefinite future. As tuition passed \$50,000, the creatives would dwindle and give way to the financials. I calculated that the precollege educations of our two children would cost more than \$1.5 million after taxes. This was the practical reason to leave.

But there was something else—another claim on us. The current phrase for it is *social justice*. I'd rather use the word *democracy*, because it conveys the idea of equality and the need for a common life among citizens. No institution has more power to form human beings according to this idea than the public school. That was the original purpose of the "common schools" established by Horace Mann in the mid-19th century: to instill in children the knowledge and morality necessary for the success of republican government,



PLACES AT THE
PRESCHOOL WERE
AWARDED ON A
FIRST-COME, FIRST-
SERVED BASIS.
AT THE FRONT OF
THE LINE, PARENTS
WERE LYING IN
SLEEPING BAGS.
THEY HAD SPENT THE
NIGHT OUTSIDE.

while “embracing children of all religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds.”

The claim of democracy doesn’t negate meritocracy, but they’re in tension. One values equality and openness, the other achievement and security. Neither can answer every need. To lose sight of either makes life poorer. The essential task is to bring meritocracy and democracy into a relation where they can coexist and even flourish.

My wife and I are products of public schools. Whatever torments they inflicted on our younger selves, we believed in them. We wanted our kids to learn in classrooms that resembled the city where we lived. We didn’t want them to grow up entirely inside our bubble—mostly white, highly and expensively educated—where 4-year-olds who hear 21,000 words a day acquire the unearned confidence of insular advantage and feel, even unconsciously, that they’re better than other people’s kids.

Public schools are a public good. Our city’s are among the most racially and economically segregated in America. The gaps in proficiency that separate white and Asian from black and Latino students in math and English are immense and growing. Some advocates argue that creating more integrated schools would reduce those gaps. Whether or not the data conclusively prove it, to be half-conscious in America is to know that schools of concentrated poverty are likely to doom the children who attend them. This knowledge is what made our decision both political and fraught.

Our “zoned” elementary school, two blocks from our house, was forever improving on a terrible reputation, but not fast enough. Friends had pulled their kids out after second or third grade, so when we took the tour we insisted, against the wishes of the school guide, on going upstairs from the kindergarten classrooms and seeing the upper grades, too. Students were wandering around the rooms without focus, the air was heavy with listlessness, there seemed to be little learning going on. Each year the school was becoming a few percentage points less poor and less black as the neighborhood gentrified, but most of the white kids were attending a “gifted and talented” school within the school, where more was expected and more was given. The school was integrating and segregating at the same time.

One day I was at a local playground with our son when I fell into conversation with an elderly black woman who had lived in the neighborhood a long time and understood all about our school dilemma, which was becoming the only subject that interested me. She scoffed at our “zoned” school—it had been badly run for so long that it would need years to become passable. I mentioned a second school, half a dozen blocks away, that was probably available if we applied. Her expression turned to alarm. “Don’t send him there,” she said. “That’s a *failure* school. That school will always be a *failure* school.” It was as if an eternal curse had been laid on it, beyond anyone’s agency or remedy. The school was mostly poor and black. We assumed it would fail our children, because we knew it was failing other children.



That year, when my son turned 5, attending daytime tours and evening open houses became a second job. We applied to eight or nine public schools. We applied to far-flung schools that we’d heard took a few kids from out of district, only to find that there was a baby boom on and the seats had already been claimed by zoned families. At one new school that had a promising reputation, the orientation talk was clotted with education jargon and the toilets in the boys’ bathroom with shit, but we would have taken a slot if one had been offered.

Among the schools where we went begging was one a couple of miles from our house that admitted children from several districts. This school was economically and racially mixed by design, with demographics that came close to matching



the city's population: 38 percent white, 29 percent black, 24 percent Latino, 7 percent Asian. That fact alone made the school a rarity in New York. Two-thirds of the students performed at or above grade level on standardized tests, which made the school one of the higher-achieving in the city (though we later learned that there were large gaps, as much as 50 percent, between the results for the wealthier, white students and the poorer, Latino and black students). And the school appeared to be a happy place. Its pedagogical model was progressive—"child centered"—based on learning through experience. Classes seemed loose, but real work was going on. Hallways were covered with well-written compositions. Part of the playground was devoted to a vegetable garden. This combination of diversity, achievement, and well-being was nearly unheard-of in New York public schools. This school squared the hardest circle. It was a liberal white family's dream. The admission rate was less than 10 percent. We got wait-listed.

The summer before our son was to enter kindergarten, an administrator to whom I'd written a letter making the case that our family and the school were a perfect match called with the news that our son had gotten in off the wait list. She gave me five minutes to come up with an answer. I didn't need four and a half of them.

I can see now that a strain of selfishness and vanity in me contaminated the decision. I lived in a cosseted New York of successful professionals. I had no authentic connection—not at work, in friendships, among neighbors—to the shared world of the city's very different groups that our son was about to enter. I was ready to offer him as an emissary to that world, a token of my public-spiritedness. The same narcissistic pride that a parent takes in a child's excellent report card, I now felt about sending him in a yellow school bus to an institution whose name began with *P.S.*

A few parents at the private school reacted as if we'd given away a winning lottery ticket, or even harmed our son—such was the brittle nature of meritocracy. And to be honest, in the coming years, when we heard that sixth graders at the private school were writing papers on *The Odyssey*, or when we watched our son and his friends sweat through competitive

public-middle-school admissions, we wondered whether we'd committed an unforgivable sin and went back over all our reasons for changing schools until we felt better.

Before long our son took to saying, "I'm a public-school person." When I asked him once what that meant, he said, "It means I'm not snooty." He never looked back.

3.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL was housed in the lower floors of an old brick building, five stories high and a block long, next to an expressway. A middle and high school occupied the upper floors. The building had the usual grim features of any public institution in New York—steel mesh over

the lower windows, a police officer at the check-in desk, scuffed yellow walls, fluorescent lights with toxic PCBs, caged stairwells, ancient boilers and no air conditioners—as if to dampen the expectations of anyone who turned to government for a basic service. The bamboo flooring and state-of-the-art science labs of private schools pandered to the desire for a special refuge from the city. Our son's new school felt utterly porous to it.

I had barely encountered an American public school since leaving high school. That was in the late 1970s, in the Bay Area, the same year that the tax revolt began its long evisceration of California's stellar education system. Back then, nothing was asked of parents except that they pay their taxes and send their children to school, and everyone I knew went to the local public schools. Now the local public schools—at least the one our son was about to attend—couldn't function without parents. Donations at our school paid the salaries of the science teacher, the Spanish teacher, the substitute teachers. They even paid for furniture. Because many of the families were poor, our PTA had a hard time meeting its annual fundraising goal of \$100,000, and some years the principal had to send out a message warning parents that science or art was about to be cut. Not many blocks away, elementary schools zoned for wealthy neighborhoods routinely raised \$1 million—these schools were called "private publics." Schools in poorer neighborhoods struggled to bring in \$30,000. This enormous gap was just one way inequality pursued us into the public-school system.

We threw ourselves into the adventure of the new school. We sent in class snacks when it was our week, I chaperoned a field trip to study pigeons in a local park, and my wife cooked chili for an autumn fundraiser. The school's sense of mission extended to a much larger community, and so there was an appeal for money when a fire drove a family from a different school out of its house, and a food drive after Hurricane Sandy ravaged the New York area, and a shoe drive for Syrian refugees in Jordan. We were ready to do just about anything to get involved. When my wife came in one day to help out in class, she was enlisted as a recess monitor and asked to change the underwear of a boy she didn't know from another class who'd soiled himself. (Volunteerism had a limit, and that was it.)

The private school we'd left behind had let parents know they weren't needed, except as thrilled audiences at performances. But our son's kindergarten teacher—an eccentric man near retirement age, whose uniform was dreadlocks (he was white), a leather apron, shorts, and sandals with socks—sent out frequent and frankly needy SOS emails. When his class of 28 students was studying the New York shoreline, he enlisted me to help build a replica of an antique cargo ship like the one docked off Lower Manhattan—could I pick up a sheet of plywood, four by eight by 5/8 of an inch, cut in half, along with four appropriate hinges and two dozen plumbing pieces, if they weren't too expensive? He would reimburse me.

That first winter, the city's school-bus drivers called a strike that lasted many weeks. I took turns with a few other parents ferrying a group of kids to and from school. Everyone who needed a ride would gather at the bus stop at 7:30 each morning and we'd figure out which parent could drive that day. Navigating the strike required a flexible schedule and a car, and it put immense pressure on families. A girl in our son's class who lived in a housing project a mile from the school suddenly stopped attending. Administrators seemed to devote as much effort to rallying families behind the bus drivers' union as to making sure every child could get to school. That was an early sign of what would come later, of all that would eventually alienate me, and I might have been troubled by it if I hadn't been so taken with my new role as a public-school father teaming up with other parents to get us through a crisis.

4.

PARENTS HAVE ONE layer of skin too few. They've lost an epidermis that could soften bruises and dull panic. In a divided city, in a stratified society, that missing skin—the intensity of every little worry and breakthrough—is the shortest and maybe the only way to intimacy between people who would otherwise never cross paths. Children become a great leveler. Parents have in common the one subject that never ceases to absorb them.

In kindergarten our son became friends with a boy in class I'll call Marcus. He had mirthful eyes, a faint smile, and an air of imperturbable calm—he was at ease with everyone, never visibly agitated or angry. His parents were working-class immigrants from the Caribbean. His father drove a sanitation truck, and his mother was a nanny whose boss had been the one to suggest entering Marcus in the school's lottery—parents with connections and resources knew about the school, while those without rarely did. Marcus's mother was a quietly demanding advocate for her son, and Marcus was exactly the kind of kid for whom a good elementary school could mean the chance of a lifetime. His family and ours were separated by race, class, and the dozen city blocks that spell the difference between a neighborhood with tree-lined streets, regular garbage collection, and upscale cupcake shops, and a neighborhood with aboveground power lines and occasional shootings. If not for the school, we would never have known Marcus's family.

The boys' friendship would endure throughout elementary school and beyond. Once, when they were still in kindergarten, my wife was walking with them in a neighborhood of townhouses near the school, and Marcus suddenly exclaimed, "Can you imagine having a backyard?" We had a backyard. Our son kept quiet, whether out of embarrassment or an early intuition that human connections require certain omissions. Marcus's father would drop him off at our house on weekends—often with the gift of a bottle of excellent rum from his home island—or I would pick Marcus up at their apartment building and drive the boys to a batting cage or the Bronx Zoo. They almost always played at our house, seldom at Marcus's, which was much smaller. This arrangement was established from the start without ever being discussed. If someone had mentioned it, we would have had to confront the glaring inequality in the boys' lives. I felt that the friendship flourished in a kind of benign avoidance of this crucial fact.

At school our son fell in with a group of boys who had no interest in joining the lunchtime soccer games. Their freewheeling playground scrums often led to good-natured insults, wrestling matches, outraged feelings, an occasional punch, then reconciliation, until the next day. And they were the image of diversity. Over the years, in addition to our son and Marcus, there was another black boy, another white boy, a Latino boy, a mixed-race boy, a boy whose Latino mother was a teacher's aide at the school, and an African boy with white lesbian parents. A teacher at the private school had once

called our son "anti-authoritarian," and it was true: He pursued friends who were mildly rebellious, irritants to the teachers and lunch monitors they didn't like, and he avoided kids who always had their hand up and displayed obvious signs of parental ambition. The anxious meritocrat in me hadn't completely faded away, and I once tried to get our son to befriend a 9-year-old who was reading *Animal Farm*, but he brushed me off. He would do this his own way.

The school's pedagogy emphasized learning through doing. Reading instruction didn't start until the end of first grade; in math, kids were taught various strategies for multiplication and division, but the times tables were their parents' problem. Instead of worksheets and tests, there were field trips to the shoreline and the Noguchi sculpture museum. "Project-based learning" had our son working for weeks on a clay model of a Chinese nobleman's tomb tower during a unit on ancient China.

Even as we continued to volunteer, my wife and I never stopped wondering if we had cheated our son of a better education. We got antsy with the endless craft projects, the utter indifference to spelling. But our son learned well only when a subject interested him. "I want to learn facts, not skills," he told his first-grade teacher. The school's approach—the year-long second-grade unit on the geology and bridges of New York—caught his imagination, while the mix of races and classes gave him something even more precious: an unselfconscious belief that no one was better than anyone else, that he was everyone's equal and everyone was his. In this way the school succeeded in its highest purpose.

And then things began to change.

5.

AROUND 2014, a new mood germinated in America—at first in a few places, among limited numbers of people, but growing with amazing rapidity and force, as new things tend to do today. It rose up toward the end of the Obama years, in part out of disillusionment with the early promise of his presidency—out of expectations raised and frustrated, especially among people under 30, which is how most revolutionary surges begin. This new mood was progressive but not hopeful. A few short years after the teachers at the private preschool had crafted Obama pendants with their 4-year-olds, hope was gone.

At the heart of the new progressivism was indignation, sometimes rage, about ongoing injustice against groups of Americans who had always been relegated to the outskirts of power and dignity. An incident—a police shooting of an unarmed black man; news reports of predatory sexual behavior by a Hollywood mogul; a pro quarterback who took to kneeling during the national anthem—would light a

fire that would spread overnight and keep on burning because it was fed by anger at injustices deeper and older than the inflaming incident. Over time the new mood took on the substance and hard edges of a radically egalitarian ideology.

At points where the ideology touched policy, it demanded, and in some cases achieved, important reforms: body cameras on cops, reduced prison sentences for nonviolent offenders, changes in the workplace. But its biggest influence came in realms more inchoate than policy: the private spaces where we think and imagine and talk and write, and the public spaces where institutions shape the contours of our culture and guard its perimeter.

Who was driving the new progressivism? Young people, influencers on social media, leaders of cultural organizations, artists, journalists, educators, and, more and more, elected Democrats. You could almost believe they spoke for a majority—but you would be wrong. An extensive survey of American political opinion published last year by a nonprofit called More in Common found that a large majority of every group, including black Americans, thought “political correctness” was a problem. The only exception was a group identified as “progressive activists”—just 8 percent of the population, and likely to be white, well educated, and wealthy. Other polls found that white progressives were readier to embrace diversity and immigration, and to blame racism for the problems of minority groups, than black Americans were. The new progressivism was a limited, mainly elite phenomenon.

Politics becomes most real not in the media but in your nervous system, where everything matters more and it’s harder to repress your true feelings because of guilt or social pressure. It was as a father, at our son’s school, that I first understood the meaning of the new progressivism, and what I disliked about it.

Every spring, starting in third grade, public-school students in New York State take two standardized tests geared to the national Common Core curriculum—one in math, one in English. In the winter of 2015–16, our son’s third-grade year, we began to receive a barrage of emails and flyers from the school about the upcoming tests. They all carried the message that the tests were not mandatory. “Inform Yourself!” an email urged us. “Whether or not your child will take the tests is YOUR decision.”

During the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies, statewide tests were used to improve low-performing schools by measuring students’ abilities, with rewards (“race to the top”) and penalties (“accountability”) doled out accordingly. These standardized tests could determine the fate of teachers and schools. Some schools began devoting months of class time to preparing students for the tests.

The excesses of “high-stakes testing” inevitably produced a backlash. In 2013, four families at our school, with the support of the administration, kept their kids from taking the tests. These parents had decided that the tests were so stressful for students and teachers alike, consumed so much of the school year with mindless preparation, and were so irrelevant to the purpose of education that they were actually harmful. But even after the city eased the consequences of the tests, the opt-out movement grew astronomically. In the spring of 2014, 250 children were kept from taking the tests.

The critique widened, too: Educators argued that the tests were structurally biased, even racist, because nonwhite students had the lowest scores. “I believe in assessment—I took tests my whole life and I’ve used assessments as an educator,” one black parent at our school, who graduated from a prestigious New York public high school, told me. “But now I see it all differently. Standardized tests are the gatekeepers to keep people out, and I know exactly who’s at the bottom. It is torturous for black, Latino, and low-income children, because they will never catch up, due to institutionalized racism.”

Our school became the citywide leader of the new movement; the principal was interviewed by the New York media. Opting out became a form of civil disobedience against a prime tool of meritocracy. It started as a spontaneous, grassroots protest against a wrongheaded state of affairs. Then, with breathtaking speed, it transcended the realm of politics and became a form of moral absolutism, with little tolerance for dissent.

We took the school at face value when it said that this decision was ours to make. My wife attended a meeting for parents, billed as an “education session.” But when she asked a question that showed we hadn’t made up our minds about the tests, another parent quickly tried to set her straight. The question was out of place—*no one* should want her child to take the tests. The purpose of the meeting wasn’t to provide neutral information. Opting out required an action—parents had to sign and return a letter—and the administration needed to educate new parents about the party

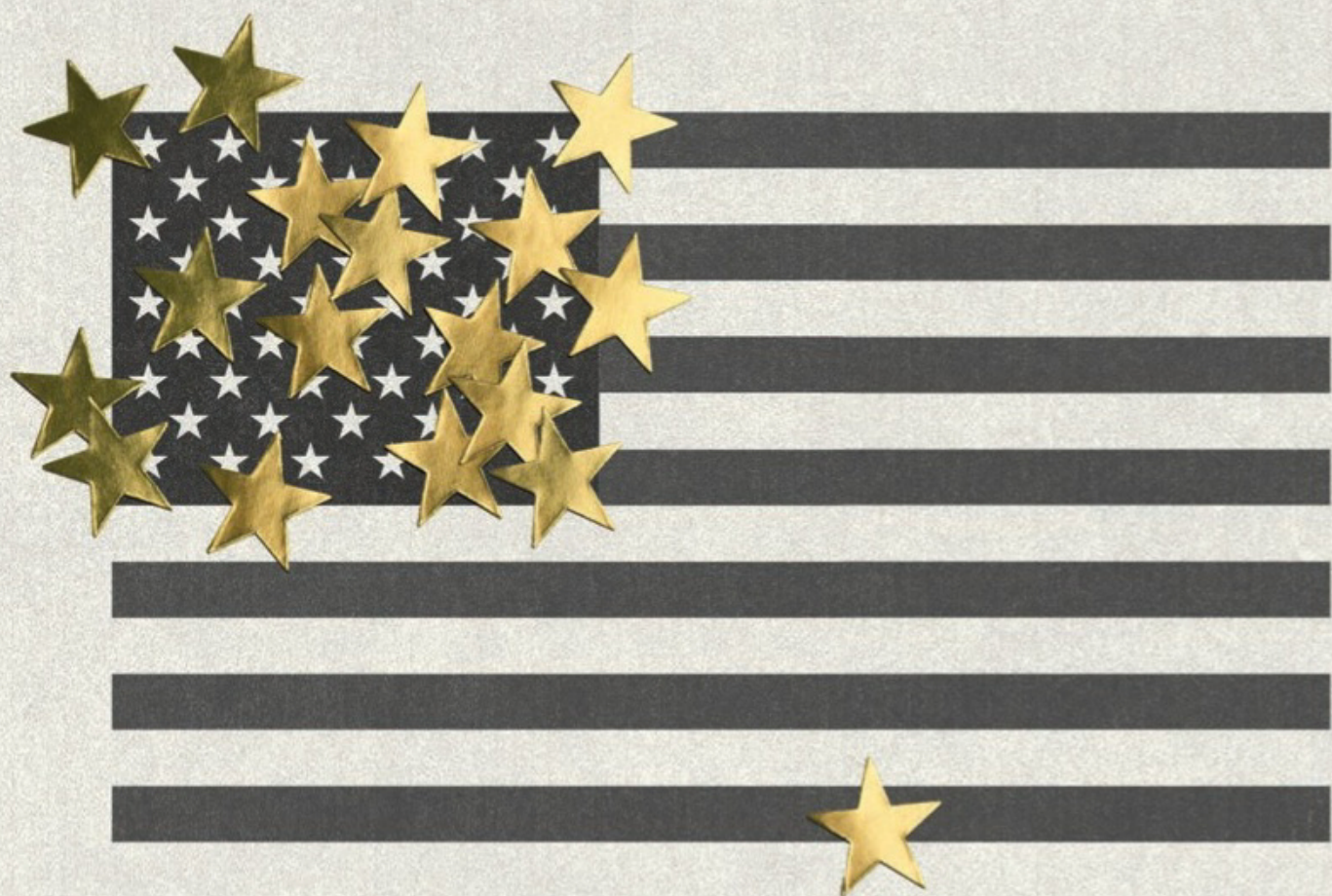
line using other parents who had already accepted it, because school employees were forbidden to propagandize.

We weren’t sure what to do. Instead of giving grades, teachers at our school wrote long, detailed, often deeply knowledgeable reports on each student. But we wanted to know how well our son was learning against an external standard. If he took the tests, he would miss a couple of days of class, but he would also learn to perform a basic task that would be part of his education for years to come.

Something else about the opt-out movement troubled me. Its advocates claimed that the tests penalized poor and minority kids. I began to think that the real penalty might come from not taking them. Opting out had become so pervasive at our school that the Department of Education no longer had enough data to publish the kind of information that prospective applicants had once used to assess the school. In the category of “Student Achievement” the department now gave our school “No Rating.” No outsider could judge how well the school was educating children, including poor, black, and Latino children. The school’s approach left gaps in areas like the times tables, long division, grammar, and spelling. Families with means filled these gaps, as did some families whose means were limited—Marcus’s parents enrolled him in after-school math tutoring. But when a girl at our bus stop fell behind because she didn’t attend school for weeks after the death of

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her grandmother, who had been the heart of the family, there was no objective measure to act as a flashing red light. In the name of equality, disadvantaged kids were likelier to falter and disappear behind a mist of togetherness and self-deception. Banishing tests seemed like a way to let everyone off the hook. This was the price of dismissing meritocracy.

I took a sounding of parents at our bus stop. Only a few were open to the tests, and they didn't say this loudly. One parent was trying to find a way to have her daughter take the tests off school grounds. Everyone sensed that failing to opt out would be unpopular with the principal, the staff, and the parent leaders—the school's power structure.

A careful silence fell over the whole subject. One day, while volunteering in our son's classroom, I asked another parent whether her son would take the tests. She flashed a nervous smile and hushed me—it wasn't something to discuss at school. One teacher disapproved of testing so intensely that, when my wife and I asked what our son would miss during test days, she answered indignantly, "Curriculum!" Students whose parents declined to opt out would get no preparation at all. It struck me that this would punish kids whom the movement was supposed to protect.

If orthodoxy reduced dissenters to whispering—if the entire weight of public opinion at the school was against the tests—then, I thought, our son should take them.

The week of the tests, one of the administrators approached me in the school hallway. "Have you decided?" I told her that our son would take the tests.

She was the person to whom I'd once written a letter about the ideal match between our values and the school's, the letter that may have helped get our son off the wait list. Back then I hadn't heard of the opt-out movement—it didn't exist. Less than four years later, it was the only truth. I wondered if she felt that I'd betrayed her.

Later that afternoon we spent an hour on the phone. She described all the harm that could come to our son if he took the tests—the immense stress, the potential for demoralization. I replied with our reason for going ahead—we wanted him to learn this necessary skill. The conversation didn't feel completely honest on either side: She also wanted to confirm the school's position in the vanguard of the opt-out movement by reaching 100 percent compliance, and I wanted to refuse to go along. The tests had become secondary. This was a political argument.

Our son was among the 15 or so students who took the tests. A 95 percent opt-out rate was a resounding success. It rivaled election results in Turkmenistan. As for our son, he finished the tests feeling neither triumphant nor defeated. The issue that had roiled the

grown-ups in his life seemed to have had no effect on him at all. He returned to class and continued working on his report about the mountain gorillas of Central Africa.

6.

THE BATTLEGROUND of the new progressivism is identity. That's the historical source of exclusion and injustice that demands redress. In the past five years, identity has set off a burst of exploration and recrimination and creation in every domain, from television to cooking. "Identity is the topic at the absolute center of our conversations about music," *The New York Times Magazine* declared in 2017, in the introduction to a special issue consisting of 25 essays on popular songs. "For better or worse, it's all identity now."

The school's progressive pedagogy had fostered a wonderfully intimate sense of each child as a complex individual. But progressive politics meant thinking in groups. When our son was in third or fourth grade, students began to form groups that met to discuss issues based on identity—race, sexuality, disability. I understood the solidarity that could come from these meetings, but I also worried that they might entrench differences that the school, by its very nature, did so much to reduce. Other, less diverse schools in New York, including elite private ones, had taken to dividing their students by race into consciousness-raising "affinity groups." I knew several mixed-race families that transferred their kids out of one such school because they were put off

by the relentless focus on race. Our son and his friends, whose classroom study included slavery and civil rights, hardly ever discussed the subject of race with one another. The school already lived what it taught.

The bathroom crisis hit our school the same year our son took the standardized tests. A girl in second grade had switched to using male pronouns, adopted the initial Q as a first name, and begun dressing in boys' clothes. Q also used the boys' bathroom, which led to problems with other boys. Q's mother spoke to the principal, who, with her staff, looked for an answer. They could have met the very real needs of students like Q by creating a single-stall bathroom—the one in the second-floor clinic would

have served the purpose. Instead, the school decided to get rid of boys' and girls' bathrooms altogether. If, as the city's Department of Education now instructed, schools had to allow students to use the bathroom of their self-identified gender, then getting rid of the labels would clear away all the confusion around the bathroom question. A practical problem was solved in conformity with a new idea about identity.

Within two years, almost every bathroom in the school, from kindergarten through fifth grade, had become gender-neutral. Where signs had once said BOYS and GIRLS, they now said STUDENTS. Kids would be conditioned to the new norm at such a young age that they would become the first cohort in history for whom gender had nothing to do with whether they sat or stood to pee. All that biology entailed—curiosity, fear, shame, aggression, pubescence, the thing between the legs—was erased or wished away.



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The school didn't inform parents of this sudden end to an age-old custom, as if there were nothing to discuss. Parents only heard about it when children started arriving home desperate to get to the bathroom after holding it in all day. Girls told their parents mortifying stories of having a boy kick open their stall door. Boys described being afraid to use the urinals. Our son reported that his classmates, without any collective decision, had simply gone back to the old system, regardless of the new signage: Boys were using the former boys' rooms, girls the former girls' rooms. This return to the familiar was what politicians call a "commonsense solution." It was also kind of heart-breaking. As children, they didn't think to challenge the new adult rules, the new adult ideas of justice. Instead, they found a way around this difficulty that the grown-ups had introduced into their lives. It was a quiet plea to be left alone.

When parents found out about the elimination of boys' and girls' bathrooms, they showed up en masse at a PTA meeting. The parents in one camp declared that the school had betrayed their trust, and a woman threatened to pull her daughter out of the school. The parents in the other camp argued that gender labels—and not just on the bathroom doors—led to bullying and that the real problem was the patriarchy. One called for the elimination of urinals. It was a minor drama of a major cultural upheaval. The principal, who seemed to care more about the testing opt-out movement than the bathroom issue, explained her financial constraints and urged the formation of a parent-teacher committee to resolve the matter. After six months of stalemate, the Department of Education intervened: One bathroom would be gender-neutral.

IN POLITICS, IDENTITY is an appeal to authority—the moral authority of the oppressed: *I am what I am, which explains my view and makes it the truth.* The politics of identity starts out with the universal principles of equality, dignity, and freedom, but in practice it becomes an end in itself—often a dead end, a trap from which there's no easy escape and maybe no desire for escape. Instead of equality, it sets up a new hierarchy that inverts the old, discredited one—a new moral caste system that ranks people by the oppression of their group identity. It makes race, which is a dubious and sinister social construct, an essence that defines individuals regardless of agency or circumstance—as when Representative Ayanna Pressley said, "We don't need any more brown faces that don't want to be a brown voice; we don't need black faces that don't want to be a black voice."

At times the new progressivism, for all its up-to-the-minuteness, carries a whiff of the 17th century, with heresy hunts and denunciations of sin and displays of self-mortification. The atmosphere of mental constriction in progressive milieus, the self-censorship and fear of public shaming, the intolerance of dissent—these are qualities of an illiberal politics.

I asked myself if I was moving to the wrong side of a great moral cause because its tone was too loud,

because it shook loose what I didn't want to give up. It took me a long time to see that the new progressivism didn't just carry my own politics further than I liked. It was actually hostile to principles without which I don't believe democracy can survive. Liberals are always slow to realize that there can be friendly, idealistic people who have little use for liberal values.

7.

IN 2016 two obsessions claimed our family—*Hamilton* and the presidential campaign. We listened and sang along to the *Hamilton* soundtrack every time we got in the car, until the kids had memorized most of its brilliant, crowded, irresistible libretto. Our son mastered Lafayette's highest-velocity rap, and in our living room he and his sister acted out the climactic duel between Hamilton and Burr. The musical didn't just teach them this latest version of the revolution and the early republic. It filled their world with the imagined past, and while the music was playing, history became more real than the present. Our daughter, who was about to start kindergarten at our son's school, wholly identified with the character of Hamilton—she fought his battles, made his arguments, and denounced his enemies. Every time he died she wept.

Hamilton and the campaign had a curious relation in our lives. The first acted as a disinfectant to the second, cleansing its most noxious effects, belying its most ominous portents. Donald Trump could sneer at Mexicans and rail against Muslims and kick dirt on everything decent and good, but the American promise still breathed whenever the Puerto Rican Hamilton and the black Jefferson got into a rap battle over the national bank. When our daughter saw pictures of the actual Founding Fathers, she was shocked and a little disappointed that they were white. The only president our kids had known was black. Their experience gave them no context for Trump's vicious brand of identity politics, which was inflaming the other kinds. We wanted them to believe that America was better than Trump, and *Hamilton* kept that belief in the air despite the accumulating gravity of facts. Our son, who started fourth grade that fall, had dark premonitions about the election, but when the *Access Hollywood* video surfaced in October, he sang Jefferson's gloating line about Hamilton's sex scandal: "Never gonna be president now!"

The morning after the election, the kids cried. They cried for people close to us, Muslims and immigrants who might be in danger, and perhaps they also cried for the lost illusion that their parents could make things right. Our son lay on the couch and sobbed inconsolably until we made him go to the bus stop.

The next time we were in the car, we automatically put on *Hamilton*. When "Dear Theodosia" came on, and Burr and Hamilton sang to their newborn children, "If we lay a strong enough foundation, we'll pass it on to you, we'll give the world to you, and you'll blow us all away," it was too much for me and my wife. We could no longer feel the romance of the young republic. It was a long time before we listened to *Hamilton* again.

A few weeks after the election, our daughter asked if Trump could break our family apart. She must have gotten the idea from overhearing a conversation about threats to undocumented immigrants. We told her that we were lucky—we had rights as citizens that he couldn't take away. I decided to sit down with the kids and read the Bill of Rights together. Not all of it made sense, but they got the basic idea—the president wasn't King George III, the Constitution was stronger than Trump, certain principles had not been abolished—and they seemed reassured.

Since then it has become harder to retain faith in these truths.

Our daughter said that she hated being a child, because she felt helpless to do anything. The day after the inauguration, my wife took her to the Women's March in Midtown Manhattan. She made a sign that said WE HAVE

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POWER TOO, and at the march she sang the one protest song she knew, “We Shall Overcome.” For days afterward she marched around the house shouting, “Show me what democracy looks like!”

Our son was less given to joining a cause and shaking his fist. Being older, he also understood the difficulty of the issues better, and they depressed him, because he knew that children really could do very little. He’d been painfully aware of climate change throughout elementary school—first grade was devoted to recycling and sustainability, and in third grade, during a unit on Africa, he learned that every wild animal he loved was facing extinction. “What are humans good for besides destroying the planet?” he asked. Our daughter wasn’t immune to the heavy mood—she came home from school one day and expressed a wish not to be white so that she wouldn’t have slavery on her conscience. It did not seem like a moral victory for our children to grow up hating their species and themselves.

We decided to cut down on the political talk around them. It wasn’t that we wanted to hide the truth or give false comfort—they wouldn’t have let us even if we’d tried. We just wanted them to have their childhood without bearing the entire weight of the world, including the new president we had allowed into office. We owed our children a thousand apologies. The future looked awful, and somehow we expected them to fix it. Did they really have to face this while they were still in elementary school?

I can imagine the retort—the rebuke to everything I’ve written here: Your privilege has spared them. There’s no answer to that—which is why it’s a potent weapon—except to say that identity alone should neither uphold nor invalidate an idea, or we’ve lost the Enlightenment to pure tribalism. Adults who draft young children into their cause might think they’re empowering them and shaping them into virtuous people (a friend calls the Instagram photos parents post of their woke kids “selflessies”). In reality the adults are making themselves feel more righteous, indulging another form of narcissistic pride, expiating their guilt, and shifting the load of their own anxious battles onto children who can’t carry the burden, because they lack the intellectual apparatus and political power. Our goal shouldn’t be to tell children what to think. The point is to teach them how to think so they can grow up to find their own answers.

I wished that our son’s school would teach him civics. By age 10 he had studied the civilizations of ancient China, Africa, the early Dutch in New Amsterdam, and the Mayans. He learned about the genocide of Native Americans and slavery. But he was never taught about the founding of the republic. He didn’t learn that conflicting values and practical compromises are the

lifeblood of self-government. He was given no context for the meaning of freedom of expression, no knowledge of the democratic ideas that Trump was trashing or of the instruments with which citizens could hold those in power accountable. Our son knew about the worst betrayals of democracy, including the one darkening his childhood, but he wasn’t taught the principles that had been betrayed. He got his civics from *Hamilton*.

The teaching of civics has dwindled since the 1960s—a casualty of political polarization, as the left and the right each accuse the other of using the subject for indoctrination—and with it the public’s basic knowledge about American government. In the past few years, civics has been making a comeback in certain states. As our son entered fifth grade, in the first year of the Trump presidency, no subject would have been more truly empowering.

Every year, instead of taking tests, students at the school presented a “museum” of their subject of study, a combination of writing and craftwork on a particular topic. Parents came in, wandered through the classrooms, read, admired, and asked questions of students, who stood beside their projects. These days, called “shares,” were my very best experiences at the school. Some of the work was astoundingly good, all of it showed thought and effort, and the coming-together of parents and kids felt like the realization of everything the school aspired to be.

The fifth-grade share, our son’s last, was different. That year’s curriculum included the Holocaust, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. The focus was on “upstanders”—

individuals who had refused to be bystanders to evil and had raised their voices. It was an education in activism, and with no grounding in civics, activism just meant speaking out. At the year-end share, the fifth graders presented dioramas on all the hard issues of the moment—sexual harassment, LGBTQ rights, gun violence. Our son made a plastic-bag factory whose smokestack spouted endangered animals. Compared with previous years, the writing was minimal and the students, when questioned, had little to say. They hadn’t been encouraged to research their topics, make intellectual discoveries, answer potential counterarguments. The dioramas consisted of cardboard, clay, and slogans.

8.

STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY public schools have to apply to middle school. They rank schools in their district, six or eight or a dozen of them, in order of preference, and the middle schools rank the students based on academic work and behavior. Then a Nobel Prize-winning algorithm matches each student with a school, and that’s almost always where the student has to go. The city’s middle schools are notoriously weak; in our district, just three had a reputation for being “good.” An education expert near us made a decent living by offering counseling sessions to panic-stricken families. The whole process seemed designed to raise the anxiety of 10-year-olds to the breaking point.

“If you fail a math test you fail seventh grade,” our daughter said one night at dinner, looking years ahead. “If you fail seventh grade you fail



“IF YOU FAIL
SEVENTH GRADE
YOU FAIL MIDDLE
SCHOOL, IF YOU
FAIL MIDDLE SCHOOL
YOU FAIL HIGH SCHOOL,
IF YOU FAIL
HIGH SCHOOL YOU
FAIL COLLEGE,
IF YOU FAIL COLLEGE
YOU FAIL LIFE.”



What Adopting A Teen Taught Me

Teenagers in foster care deserve families as much as younger children do. And bringing a teen into your home can yield surprising, joyful lessons—just ask these parents.

WE ASKED FAMILIES across America to tell us what teen adoption taught them. Parents and the teenagers they adopted hand-wrote letters to each other, detailing the fears and anxieties they started with, and the unexpected bonds and connections they have today.

Mike and Jennifer Allred, who adopted Andrew, Amberlynn, and Misty when they were 20, 10, and 7, had adoption experiences with every age group. You can read the letter they wrote to their children here.

The Allred parents say that adopting teenagers showed them that the desire to be loved doesn't have an age limit. ↓



Dear Andrew, Misty, and Amberlynn,

Adopting you taught us that the desire to be loved does not come with an expiration date or an age limit. We are so grateful that our initial plans to adopt a younger child were completely tossed. What if we had said no? Just thinking about that feels devastating. You showed us that we needed you as much as you needed us and, as teenagers, you brought a sense of determination and resilience to our family. We pray that you never forget how much we love you, and more importantly, that you always feel loved.

With all our hearts,
Mom and Dad

The Allred family currently includes six teenagers from all backgrounds and walks of life, and Mike and Jennifer wouldn't have it any other way. →



To read more stories and watch original videos about the lessons and joys of adopting older children, go to: TheAtlantic.com/WhatAdoptingATeenTaughtMe



middle school, if you fail middle school you fail high school, if you fail high school you fail college, if you fail college you fail life.”

We were back to the perversions of meritocracy. But the country’s politics had changed dramatically during our son’s six years of elementary school. Instead of hope pendants around the necks of teachers, in one middle-school hallway a picture was posted of a card that said, “Uh-oh! Your privilege is showing. You’ve received this card because your privilege just allowed you to make a comment that others cannot agree or relate to. Check your privilege.” The card had boxes to be marked, like a scorecard, next to “White,” “Christian,” “Heterosexual,” “Able-bodied,” “Citizen.” (Our son struck the school off his list.) This language is now not uncommon in the education world. A teacher in Saratoga Springs, New York, found a “privilege-reflection form” online with an elaborate method of scoring, and administered it to high-school students, unaware that the worksheet was evidently created by a right-wing internet troll—it awarded Jews 25 points of privilege and docked Muslims 50.

The middle-school scramble subjected 10- and 11-year-olds to the dictates of meritocracy and democracy at the same time: a furiously competitive contest and a heavy-handed ideology. The two systems don’t coexist so much as drive children simultaneously toward opposite extremes, realms that are equally inhospitable to the delicate, complex organism of a child’s mind. If there’s a relation between the systems, I came to think, it’s this: Wokeness prettifies the success race, making contestants feel better about the heartless world into which they’re pushing their children. Constantly checking your privilege is one way of not having to give it up.

On the day acceptance letters arrived at our school, some students wept. One of them was Marcus, who had been matched with a middle school that he didn’t want to attend. His mother went in to talk to an administrator about an appeal. The administrator asked her why Marcus didn’t instead go to the middle school that shared a building with our school, that followed the same progressive approach as ours, and that was one of the worst-rated in the state. Marcus’s mother left in fury and despair. She had no desire for him to go to the middle school upstairs.

Our son got into one of the “good” middle schools. Last September he came home from the first day of school and told us that something was wrong. His classmates didn’t look like the kids in his elementary school. We found a pie chart that broke his new school down by race, and it left him stunned. Two-thirds of the students were white or Asian; barely a quarter were black or Latino. Competitive admissions had created a segregated school.

His will be the last such class. Two years ago, Mayor Bill de Blasio declared a new initiative to integrate New York City’s schools. Our district, where there are enough white families for integration to be meaningful, was chosen as a test case. Last year a committee of teachers, parents, and activists in the district announced a proposal: Remove the meritocratic hurdle that stands in the way of equality. The proposal would get rid of competitive admissions for middle school—grades, tests, attendance, behavior—which largely

accounted for the racial makeup at our son’s new school. In the new system, students would still rank their choices, but the algorithm would be adjusted to produce middle schools that reflect the demography of our district, giving disadvantaged students a priority for 52 percent of the seats. In this way, the district’s middle schools would be racially and economically integrated. De Blasio’s initiative was given the slogan “Equity and Excellence for All.” It tried to satisfy democracy and meritocracy in a single phrase.

I went back and forth and back again, and finally decided to support the new plan. My view was gratuitous, since the change came a year too late to affect our son. I would have been sorely tested if chance had put him in the first experimental class. Under the new system, a girl at his former bus stop got matched with her 12th choice, and her parents decided to send her to a charter school. No doubt many other families will leave the public-school system. But I had seen our son flourish by going to an elementary school



that looked like the city. I had also seen meritocracy separate out and demoralize children based on their work in fourth grade. “If you fail middle school,” our daughter said, “you fail life.” It was too soon for children’s fates to be decided by an institution that was supposed to serve the public good.

I wanted the plan to succeed, but I had serious doubts. It came festooned with all the authoritarian excess of the new progressivism. It called for the creation of a new diversity bureaucracy, and its relentless jargon squashed my hope that the authors knew how to achieve an excellent education for all. Instead of teaching civics that faced the complex truths of American democracy, “the curriculum will highlight the vast historical contributions of non-white groups & seek to dispel the many non-truths/lies related to American & World History.”

“Excellence” was barely an afterthought in the plan. Of its 64 action items, only one even mentioned what was likely to be the hardest problem:

“Provide support for [district] educators in adopting best practices for academically, racially & socioeconomically mixed classrooms.” How to make sure that children of greatly different abilities would succeed, in schools that had long been academically tracked? How to do it without giving up on rigor altogether—without losing the fastest learners?

We had faced this problem with our daughter, who was reading far ahead of her grade in kindergarten and begged her teacher for math problems to solve. When the school declined to accommodate her, and our applications to other public schools were unsuccessful, we transferred her to a new, STEM-focused private school rather than risk years of boredom. We regretted leaving the public-school system, and we were still wary of the competitive excesses of meritocracy, but we weren’t willing to abandon it altogether.

The Department of Education didn’t seem to be thinking about meritocracy at all. Its entire focus was on achieving diversity, and on rooting out the racism that stood in the way of that.

Late in the summer of 2018, a public meeting was called in our district to discuss the integration plan. It was the height of vacation season, but several hundred parents, including me, showed up. Many had just heard about the new plan, which buried the results of an internal poll showing that a majority of parents wanted to keep the old system. We were presented with a slideshow that included a photo of white adults snarling at black schoolchildren in the South in the 1960s—as if only vicious racism could motivate parents to oppose eliminating an admissions system that met superior work with

a more challenging placement. Even if the placement was the fruit of a large historical injustice, parents are compromised; a policy that tells them to set aside their children’s needs until that injustice has been remedied is asking for failure. Just in case the implication of racism wasn’t enough to intimidate dissenters, when the presentation ended, and dozens of hands shot up, one of the speakers, a progressive city-council member, announced that he would take no questions. He waved off the uproar that ensued. It was just like the opt-out “education session” my wife had attended: The deal was done. There was only one truth.

De Blasio’s schools chancellor, Richard Carranza, has answered critics of the diversity initiative by calling them out for racism and refusing to let them “silence” him. As part of the initiative, Carranza has mandated anti-bias training for every employee of the school system, at a cost of \$23 million. One training slide was titled “White Supremacy Culture.” It included “Perfectionism,” “Individualism,” “Objectivity,” and “Worship of the Written Word” among the white-supremacist values that need to be disrupted. In the name of exposing racial bias, the training created its own kind.

The legacy of racism, together with a false meritocracy in America today that keeps children trapped where they are, is the root cause of the inequalities in the city’s schools. But calling out racism and getting rid of objective standards won’t create real equality or close the achievement gap, and might have the perverse effect of making it worse by driving out families of all races who cling to an idea of education based on real merit. If integration is a necessary condition for equality, it isn’t sufficient. Equality is too important to be left to an ideology that rejects universal values.

9.

IN MIDDLE SCHOOL our son immediately made friends with the same kind of kids who had been his friends in elementary school—outsiders—including Latino boys from the district’s poorest neighborhood. One day he told us about the “N-word passes” that were being exchanged among other boys he knew—a system in which a black kid, bartering for some item, would allow a white kid to use the word. We couldn’t believe such a thing existed, but it did. When one white boy kept using his pass all day long, our son grabbed the imaginary piece of paper and ripped it to shreds. He and his friends heard the official language of moral instruction so often that it became a source of irony and teasing: “Hey, dude, you really need to check your privilege.” When his teacher assigned students to write about how they felt about their identity, letting the class know that whiteness was a source of guilt for her, our son told her that he couldn’t do it. The assignment was too personal, and it didn’t leave enough space for him to describe all that made him who he was.

“Isn’t school for learning math and science and reading,” he asked us one day, “not for teachers to tell us what to think about society?” He was responding as kids do when adults keep telling them what to think. He had what my wife called unpoliticized empathy.

Watching your children grow up gives you a startlingly vivid image of the world you’re going to leave them. I can’t say I’m sanguine. Some days the image fills me with dread. That pragmatic genius for which Americans used to be known and admired, which included a talent for educating our young—how did it desert us? Now we’re stewing in anxiety and anger, feverish with bad ideas, too absorbed in our own failures to spare our children. But one day the fever will break, and by then they’ll be grown, and they will have to discover for themselves how to live together in a country that gives every child an equal chance. **A**

George Packer is an Atlantic staff writer. His most recent books are Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century *and* The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America.

WHEN MEDICAID TAKES EVERYTHING YOU OWN

FOR MANY PARTICIPANTS,
THE PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES HEALTH CARE
TO MILLIONS OF LOW-INCOME AMERICANS ISN'T FREE.
IT'S A LOAN.
AND THE GOVERNMENT EXPECTS TO BE REPAYED.

BY → Rachel Corbett

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Nathan Bajar



Tawanda Rhodes believed she would inherit her parents' home. Then she received a letter from her state's Medicaid program.

THE FOLDED AMERICAN FLAG

from her father's military funeral is displayed on the mantel in Tawanda Rhodes's living room. Joseph Victorian, a descendant of Creole slaves, had enlisted in the Army 10 days after learning that the United States was going to war with Korea.

After he was wounded in combat, Joseph was stationed at a military base in Massachusetts. There he met and fell in love with Edna Smith-Rhodes, a young woman who had recently moved to Boston from North Carolina. The couple started a family and eventually settled in the brick towers of the Columbia Point housing project. Joseph took a welding job at a shipyard and pressed laundry on the side; later, Edna would put her southern cooking skills to use in a school cafeteria. In 1979, Joseph and Edna bought a house in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood for \$24,000.

Just a few years after they moved in, Joseph died of blood-circulation problems. But by leaving that house to his wife and children, its mortgage satisfied by his life-insurance payout, he

died believing that he had secured a legacy for his family, which, in just a few generations, had lifted itself out of slavery, segregation, and poverty to own a piece of the American dream.

When I visited Dorchester this spring, Tawanda, 62, was waiting for me on the front porch of the three-story, vinyl-sided house. She now lives there alone, and on borrowed time.

The trouble began when her mother started showing signs of Alzheimer's disease. For a while, one of Tawanda's brothers cared for Edna, but he was sick himself and died in 2004. A guardian of the state admitted Edna into a nursing home and signed her up for the state's Medicaid program, MassHealth. Tawanda was relieved that her mother was being cared for while she was busy arranging her brother's funeral. But when she arrived in Boston from Brooklyn, where she and her husband had settled, she heard rumors about MassHealth "robbing people of their homes" as reimbursement for their medical bills.

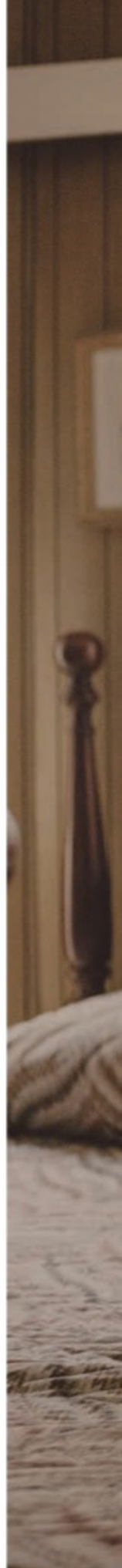
She soon learned that the rumors held some truth. Medicaid, the government program that provides health care to more than 75 million low-income and disabled Americans, isn't necessarily free. It's the only major welfare program that can function like a loan. Medicaid recipients over the age of 55 are expected to repay the government for many medical expenses—and states will seize houses and other assets after those recipients die in order to satisfy the debt.

Sure enough, just weeks after Edna entered the nursing home, Tawanda received a notice that MassHealth had put a lien on the house. Tawanda called the agency and said she wanted to take her mother off Medicaid; she knew Edna had alternatives as a longtime employee of Boston Public Schools. A representative for MassHealth told her not to worry: If she took her mother out of the nursing home, the agency would remove the lien and her mother could continue to receive Medicaid benefits.

Tawanda and her husband, Oliver, decided to move to Boston. They took Edna out of the nursing facility and brought her home to care for her full time. "The place was pretty dilapidated, but I knew it was ours, so my husband and I started bringing it back to life," Tawanda said.

Oliver and Tawanda had lived a modest but comfortable life in Brooklyn. He worked maintenance for Time Warner; she was a bartender. To renovate the old house, they cashed in all of their savings bonds, about \$100,000 worth. They tore up the shag carpeting, refinished the floors, painted the walls, remounted the cabinets. They replaced the 1970s appliances—brown dishwasher, blue toilet, and mustard-colored refrigerator—with modern ones. They paid off Edna's second mortgage, and her third.

Then, in 2007, Oliver started showing signs of dementia, and shortly thereafter, he too was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Now Tawanda spent her days caring for both her mother and her husband, shuttling them back and forth to doctor's appointments, giving baths, clipping toenails, changing diapers. She cooked them special dinners "as they started not being able to chew this or swallow that." After putting them to bed at night,





Above: Tawanda holds a photograph of her father and mother, who purchased their home in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood in 1979. Opposite page: The flag Rhodes's father earned for his service in the Korean War.

if she wasn't too tired, she'd mix herself an apple martini and read in the kitchen, often her only hour of relaxation in the day.

This went on until the end of 2009, when Edna died, at home, in Oliver's arms. Afterward, Tawanda received a letter from the Massachusetts Office of Health and Human Services, which oversees MassHealth, notifying her that the state was seeking "reimbursement from [Edna's] estate for Medicaid payments made

on her behalf." For Edna's five years on MassHealth, she owed \$198,660.26.

"You must be kidding me," Tawanda recalled telling the MassHealth caseworker on the phone. As proof, the agency sent her a 28-page itemized bill for "every Band-Aid, every can of Ensure" her mother had used. The state gave Tawanda six months to pay the debt in full, after which she would begin accruing interest at a rate of 12 percent. If she couldn't afford it, the state could force her to sell the Dorchester house and take its share of the proceeds to settle the debt.

Tawanda's hair started falling out soon after. She and Oliver, who was in the final stages of Alzheimer's, had no savings and no jobs. "I said to myself, *I don't care what they do to me. I can take care of myself*," she told me. "But I couldn't have my dying husband thrown out into the street."

She wrote to nearly every elected official in the state. "No one would help me," she said.

Now instead of reading a late-night romance novel, she stayed up researching Medicaid regulations. She discovered that MassHealth allows some exceptions. It will not seize a home occupied by a spouse or a dependent child of the late Medicaid recipient until they die or move. It also offers waivers for financial hardship and an "adult child caregiver" exemption for those who lived with a parent for at least two years and "provided care that allowed the applicant to remain at home."

That was her, Tawanda thought. She and Oliver had a combined monthly income of just \$1,400, well below the threshold to claim financial hardship, and she had taken

care of her mother at home for more than five years. But Tawanda told me the state rejected her requests for both exceptions. To qualify for the caregiver exemption, an adult child must live in the house for two years *before* a parent enters a long-term-care facility. Tawanda doesn't know why she didn't qualify for the financial-hardship waiver. "Somebody makes that decision somewhere and that's it," says Joanna Allison, the executive director of the

Volunteer Lawyers Project, who helped Tawanda find a pro bono lawyer. It didn't matter that Tawanda had taken her mother out of a nursing home to provide care that saved the Medicaid system hundreds of thousands of dollars, Allison told me.

MassHealth representatives declined to be interviewed for this story and do not comment on individual cases for privacy reasons. A spokesperson said in a statement, "MassHealth's application and member notification materials provide notices related to estate recovery to ensure applicants are informed of this requirement upfront."

Tawanda reminded her caseworker of the lien release the agency had sent her years ago. But "what they didn't tell me then was that they had the right to reinstate" the claim on the property after her mother's death. This was estate recovery now, the caseworker told her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

BILL CLINTON SIGNED the Medicaid Estate Recovery Program into law as part of his deficit-reduction act in 1993. Previously, states had the right to seek repayment for Medicaid debts; the new law made it mandatory. The policy arrived at a time when political rhetoric about individual responsibility dominated the national discourse. The idea that welfare created a "spider's web of dependency," as Ronald Reagan once put it, played into fears that taxpayers were shouldering the burden for rampant abuse of the system. Politicians such as then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich tried to justify deep cuts to Medicaid and Medicare by promoting the idea that the programs were exploited by con artists and layabouts—people who "want to be 70 pounds overweight, drink a quart of hard liquor a day, pay no attention to exercise, and then tell you it's your obligation to make me healthy," Gingrich said at the time. "You cannot have totally irresponsible humans enjoying the benefits of responsibility."

Estate recovery was billed as a sensible reform: States would recoup costs for the largest category of Medicaid spending—long-term care, such as nursing homes—from the people most likely to incur them (those 55 and older) in order to replenish the program's coffers and help others in need. (If there was no money to be had in an estate, then the debt simply went unpaid.) The goal was not to deter people from going on Medicaid, but to mitigate the cost of an already expensive program that the Baby Boomer generation was projected to bankrupt.

Some states initially resisted implementing estate recovery. West Virginia legislators called it "abhorrent" in a federal lawsuit seeking to have it declared unconstitutional. (An appeals court

rejected the suit in 2002.) Michigan became the last state to enact recoveries, in 2007, after the federal government threatened to cut its Medicaid funding if it didn't. Other states opted to collect only high-value assets, or offered exemptions for family farms or estates worth less than a few thousand dollars.

The majority of states, however, took a harder line. Some started allowing pre-death liens, tacking interest onto past-due debts, or limiting the number of hardship waivers granted. The law gave states the option to expand their recovery efforts to include other medical expenses, and many did, collecting for every doctor's visit, pharmaceutical drug, and surgery that Medicaid covered.



After the death of her mother, Edna, Tawanda received a letter from MassHealth's estate-recovery unit. For Edna's five years on Medicaid, she owed \$198,660.26. If Tawanda couldn't cover the debt, the state could compel her to sell the Dorchester home so MassHealth could take its share.

As projected, aging Boomers were straining the system. States' spending on Medicaid services soared from \$137 billion in 1994 to \$577 billion in 2017, when the oldest Boomers reached their 70s. Much of the cost comes from long-term care: Medicaid pays for about 50 percent of the nation's 1.4 million nursing-home residents, coverage that's often denied by private insurers and even by Medicare, the low-cost federal insurance available to anyone age 65 or over, regardless of income. Medicaid also bears the brunt of costs for patients with illnesses such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, whose needs often fall under "custodial" rather than "medical" care, and who therefore are largely denied coverage by Medicare as well. "It's Medicaid, a low-income program, that has by default turned into our long-term-care system, and that is absolutely unsustainable," Matt Salo, the executive director of the National Association of Medicaid Directors, told me.

Defenders of estate recovery see it both as a way to control the high costs of long-term care and as a necessary check on those who could pay for such care but would rather the government foot the bill. (Nursing homes cost \$89,000 a year, on average, for a semiprivate room.) Medicaid, Salo told me, is already struggling to meet the needs of the poorest Americans. Should it also cover long-term care for "someone who's going to pass hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars of assets on to their family?"

But the overwhelming majority of estates are not worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. In 2005, the Public Policy Institute of the

AARP published a study of the first decade of mandatory estate recovery. Massachusetts, it found, recovered an average of \$16,442 per estate in 2003, in total offsetting a little more than 1 percent of its long-term-care costs that year. That made its efforts among the most effective in the nation. In Kentucky, by contrast, the average amount collected from an estate was \$93; the state recovered just 0.25 percent of its long-term-care costs. The total amount states recouped jumped from \$72 million in 1996 to \$347 million seven years later—but even so, estate recoveries accounted for less than 1 percent of Medicaid's total nursing-home costs in 2003.

Opponents of estate recovery say that the harm of destabilizing low-income families does not justify the meager returns. "It's a

drop in the bucket given the amount of misery they cause people," says Patricia McGinnis, the executive director of the California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform, which co-sponsored successful 2016 legislation to limit the assets Medicaid can recover in California. "It's a terrible program, it's a punitive program, and it doesn't do anything to reimburse the billions of dollars spent," she told me. "The purpose of recovery was to support Medicaid and bring money back, but how? By collecting anything from the poorest of the poor? It's ridiculous." By contrast, she says, "you could have a \$100,000 heart operation on Medicare and there's no recovery." One lawyer in Tennessee recalled a case in which a woman went to her late mother's Medicaid auction to buy back quilts that had been passed down for generations.

Treva Bollman, an accountant in Elwood, Kansas, had been receiving Medicaid benefits for four years, and was just one year shy of qualifying for Medicare, when she died from cancer. A few months later, her husband, Walter, received a letter from Kansas's Medicaid Estate Recovery Unit. "I don't know what this means," he told his stepdaughter Janie at the time. "It says I owe the state of Kansas a half million dollars or they're going to take my home."

Walter lives on a two-acre plot passed down from his great-grandparents. After their town was devastated by a flood in 1993, he and Treva built a double-wide trailer on that ancestral land. Walter, who worked most of his life cutting scrap metal despite a childhood accident that left him with only one arm, has never been on Medicaid. But under Kansas law, the state can collect his house and land, worth an estimated \$40,000, to put toward his wife's debt.

The state will let Walter live the rest of his life there, but that does little to comfort him. "It's for you kids," he told Janie.

"If you spend your whole life working for something, you take pride in being able to pass something on to your children," Janie told me. "They took that sense of pride away from him."

ONE OF THE REASONS estate recovery works at all is that few people know about it. Although states disclose the policy in their Medicaid-enrollment forms, it's often buried in fine print that can easily be overlooked, especially when applicants are anxiously seeking urgent medical care. MassHealth, for example,

places its notice about three-quarters of the way down page 20 of its 34-page application: "To the extent permitted by law, and unless exceptions apply, for any eligible person age 55 or older, or any eligible person for whom MassHealth helps pay for care in a nursing home, MassHealth will seek money from the eligible person's estate after death."

"It's all technically accurate, but it's hard for a nonlawyer to know that that means *We're going to send you a bill*," says Gregory Wilcox, an elder-law attorney in California who's received "lots of calls from people who are dismayed, shocked," first by the loss of their loved one and then by the secondary blow of losing their inheritance.

ESTATE RECOVERY PUNISHES WORKING- AND MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICANS WHO, DESPITE THE ODDS, HAVE MANAGED TO SCRAPE TOGETHER A LITTLE SOMETHING TO PASS ON TO THEIR CHILDREN.

One of the few times estate recovery has made headlines was earlier this decade, during the rollout of the Obama administration's Medicaid expansion. As more Americans considered Medicaid as a health-insurance option, more came across the fine print. At least three states passed legislation to scale back their recovery policies after public outcry.

I initially learned about estate recovery because it's going to happen to my own family. My mother enrolled in Medicaid at age 55 after being rejected by other insurers for having once had the preexisting condition of cancer. Last year, she called me crying because she'd heard that the state will take our house in rural Iowa when she dies.

At first I didn't believe her. She had bought the house on contract for \$35,000 in 1995 and had long since made the last payment. It was among the most rewarding decisions of her life, but also one of the riskiest. My parents' divorce had plunged our family into poverty as my mother struggled to raise two children without child support, on two low-wage jobs, as a teacher's aide in an elementary school and, on weekends, as a clerk at a health-food store.

When the house we were renting was sold to another family, we found ourselves on the brink of homelessness, at the mercy of a new landlord willing to rent to a single mother for cheap. So when she found a little yellow house on a patch of eastern-Iowa farmland for \$400 a month, she hung a tapestry to cover the hole in the kitchen ceiling, and we moved in. A few years later the landlord fell behind on his property taxes, and my mother offered to buy the place. She began reinforcing the weather-beaten porch, reshingling the roof, and painting the plywood floors. She planted sunflowers and a vegetable garden, showing us that even after losing everything, it was still possible to build things that last.

That someone could now take that house from us seemed an impossibly cruel twist. After I hung up the phone, I went online to look for evidence that she was mistaken. What I found instead was page after page of attorney ads warning potential Medicaid recipients to hire them immediately in order to save their home before it was too late.

For us, it was already too late. If my mother stays on Medicaid, the state will almost certainly take our house when she dies; if she transfers it to my or my brother's name, her Medicaid benefits will be suspended. Unable to afford other insurance options, and unable to go without insurance as a cancer survivor, she has no choice but to remain on the government program.

Unlike Tawanda Rhodes, my brother and I don't live in the house, nor do our futures depend on inheriting it. But in a country that protects the passage of intergenerational wealth for its most privileged sons and daughters, there's a special indignity to having to fight for a trailer, or \$93, or a shack at the edge of an Iowa cornfield that's of virtually no value to the government but has meant everything to us. As my wealthier peers in New

York inherit summer houses, art collections, and trusts—their riches maximized by an ever-eroding estate tax—it compounds the sense of shame my mother feels in failing to leave her children with even a modest leg up, and in knowing that, had she been better informed, she might have prevented it all.

As I learned from reading the lawyers' ads, it's possible to protect your assets by putting them into an irrevocable trust or transferring a deed to a family member before you reach retirement age. "These are not loopholes," says Michael Amoruso, the president of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys. "Congress and the states allow people to plan."

But the people who consult estate planners are typically those who have wealth to plan for in the first place. "I can't think of a single person who has come to me to avoid estate recovery," Gregory Wilcox says, "because they're usually not aware of it." Instead, those who do find out about it are those who "come to me for estate planning. I tell them, 'I've got good news for you: I can help you avoid probate, and if you avoid that you can also avoid Medicaid estate recovery.' They're not even aware of the need to do that."

Perversely, then, the program punishes neither the affluent nor those with nothing to lose, but working- and middle-class Americans who, despite the odds, have managed to scrape together a little something to pass on to their children.

HOMEOWNERSHIP IS ONE OF the greatest catalysts of class mobility in America. Home equity provides a lifeline during emergencies and helps ensure that your children won't slip down the economic ladder. A typical homeowner's net worth is \$231,400—nearly 45 times that of the average renter's net worth of \$5,200, according to a 2016 Federal Reserve survey.

Homeowners also benefit from considerable financial perks, such as mortgage-interest deductions and capital-gains exemptions inscribed into our tax codes. "Wealthy people aren't on Medicaid, but they're getting all kinds of other benefits," says Brian McCabe, a sociologist at Georgetown and the author of *No Place Like Home: Wealth, Community, and the Politics of Homeownership*. The mortgage-interest deduction alone—a set of housing subsidies that primarily benefits Americans in the top 20 percent of the income distribution—cost the federal government \$66 billion in 2017. By comparison, letting every family of a Medicaid recipient keep their property would cost just \$500 million, according to 2011 data gathered by the Office of the Inspector General, the most recent available.

But the benefits of homeownership aren't merely financial. For many people, owning property is a crucial source of security and status, often marking one's arrival in the middle class. "It's the stability of being in a place, of knowing no one's going to take your house away from you," McCabe says. "You've made

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it, earned your independence through hard work.” This is especially true among those for whom that dream has always been far out of reach, such as low-income and nonwhite Americans. In a 2018 study in the journal *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, McCabe found that Latinos and African Americans were twice as likely as white Americans to consider social status an important reason to

no way I would even qualify for a loan to get another home,” she said. She looked into public housing, but there are 10,000 people on the wait list and it’s currently closed.

Musgrave paid an attorney \$5,000 from her savings to plead a hardship case to the state in the hopes of negotiating down her mother’s bill. She was denied, without explanation. “No, we’re not able to reduce the bill,” she said was the state’s response. “Go live on the street, live in a box under the bridge. We don’t care; we want our money.”

LAST YEAR, for the first time in her life, Tawanda Rhodes didn’t vote. When Election Day came she pulled up in front of the polling station and sat there for a minute, then drove off. “It did not make me feel good,” she said. “But I felt like, *Vote for what? No one cares about me.*”

Today she hears Democratic presidential candidates talking about a public option and Medicare for All, and she wonders if that would render a low-income program such as Medicaid redundant, and estate recovery a thing of the past. But change probably won’t come soon enough for Tawanda. Last year her attorney told her that her best option was to accept a deal from MassHealth that would keep its claim on the house but allow her to remain there as a tenant until her death. (Oliver died in 2018.) But the contract stipulated that if she fell behind on any of her bills or taxes, or didn’t keep up on repairs, she’d have to vacate. “They were setting me up for failure,” she said.

Tawanda refused to sign. She no longer trusted MassHealth, and she objected to the deal on principle. “From slavery years we never got our 40 acres and a mule; we never got reparations,” she said. “My parents *made* their 40 acres and a mule with blood, sweat, and tears, and now they want that too?”

Money was so tight that paying a bill a little late was almost inevitable. A few

months ago, the ceiling in an upstairs bedroom cracked and water poured in. She patched the hole as best she could, but the house needs a new roof, and she says no bank will lend her the money for the project because of the Medicaid debt. “They got my hands locked where I can’t get any equity out of the home, so they figure, ‘It’s gonna fall, the roof is gonna blow one day, and she’s gonna have to get the hell out of there.’”

Tawanda doesn’t know which will come down on her first, MassHealth or the roof. Any day now, the state could file suit to force her to sell the house, but she’s decided to stay put. “After my husband died I picked up the sword again,” she said. “I will fight them to the death. I will never, ever give up this fight, and I will never sign a paper saying that they own my house.” **A**

Rachel Corbett is the author of You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin, which won the 2016 Marfield Prize. She lives in Brooklyn.



Tawanda has refused to sell her house to pay her mother’s Medicaid debt. “From slavery years we never got our 40 acres and a mule; we never got reparations,” she said. “My parents *made* their 40 acres and a mule with blood, sweat, and tears, and now they want that too?”

buy a home. “When you’ve historically been excluded from this thing that is centrally American, the ability to achieve it is that much more meaningful,” he says.

If homeownership is one of the greatest means of upward mobility, then estate recovery, a program that strips property from the people who stand to benefit from it the most, is an insidious obstacle, perpetuating cycles of poverty and pushing displaced families back into the welfare system.

Lisa Musgrave, a 56-year-old secretary in Nashville, told me she’ll be homeless when the state forecloses on the house she’s been living in for the past eight years to collect on her late mother’s \$171,000 Medicaid debt. “If I could afford to pack up and move down the road to another house, that would be fine,” she said. “But I don’t make \$80,000 a year,” which is about what it costs to live comfortably in Nashville, where the median price of a home is \$320,000. Musgrave, who works for the state’s handgun-permit office, makes \$31,000 before taxes. “There’s



SUC

Inside the battle to control the next generation of the Trump dynasty

CES

By McKay Coppins

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The empire begins with a brothel. It stands, sturdy and square, at the heart of a gold-rush boomtown in northwest British Columbia, a monument to careful branding. The windows of the Arctic Restaurant have no signs offering access to prostitutes—even in a lawless Yukon outpost in 1899, decorum rules out such truth in advertising—but Friedrich Trump knows his clientele. ¶ Curtained-off “private boxes” line the wall opposite the bar, inside of which are beds, and women, and scales to weigh gold powder, the preferred method of payment for services rendered. Word of the restaurant’s off-menu accommodations spreads fast. “Respectable women” are advised by *The Yukon Sun* to avoid the place, as they are “liable to hear that which would be repugnant to their feelings.” But among lonely prospectors, the Arctic is a hit. Before long, Friedrich is boasting, with a hereditary penchant for hyperbole, that his establishment serves more than 3,000 meals a day. ¶ It’s true that he has plenty of customers. A hundred thousand men have raced north in search of gold at the twilight of the 19th century, hypnotized by a shimmering mirage that Friedrich himself must have recognized. He was chasing a similar figment when he left his German hometown at 16, crossed the Atlantic in steerage, and disembarked on the shores of Manhattan, poor, dirty, and emanating the signature migrant’s stench—widely known then as “ship”—which would cling to him for days no matter how hard he scrubbed. He made a living for a while as a barber, but a living was not what he’d come for. So when he heard about fortunes being made in the Pacific Northwest, he gathered his savings and boarded a train. ¶ Friedrich sees that he can get rich in the Klondike not by digging for gold but by servicing the gold rushers themselves. This is its own kind of extractive business—“mining the miners,” his biographer, Gwenda Blair, will later call it—and it requires a distinct skill set. Quiet and wiry, with a handlebar mustache, he bounces from boomtown to boomtown, conning his way onto scraps of land by pretending to find gold there. Once a claim is secured, he hustles to make as much cash as he can before the local bubble bursts and the miners move on. ¶ A restaurant in Seattle’s red-light district. A boarding house in Monte Cristo, Washington. A trailside tent hawking horse meat and liquor to the men stampeding up Alaska’s White Pass. Each venture turns a profit, but the brothel is the one that makes him rich enough to return home to Germany and have his pick of pretty, much younger brides. ¶ Friedrich and his wife consider staying in their native country, but he is a draft dodger—or so the government says—and

his petition for residency is denied. Indignant, he takes his new family and his new money back to New York City, where he is free to pursue that shape-shifting mirage—is it starting to resemble respectability?—without the weight of a past. By the time the Spanish flu takes him at age 49, he’s amassed a modest fortune—the modern equivalent of half a million dollars—and a small portfolio of outer-borough properties. It isn’t Rockefeller money, but it’s enough, just barely, to launch a dynasty.

To keep the family afloat, Friedrich’s widow, Elizabeth, assigns each of her children a job in their fledgling real-estate business. But it’s Fred, the middle child, who has a knack for building, both houses and empires, and he takes charge shortly after high school.

Fred runs the enterprise in a clock-racing, corner-cutting scramble, selling each new house to cover construction costs for the last. He backslaps his way through Brooklyn’s political machine, cozies up to mobsters. One house in Woodhaven leads to two in Queens Village, then several more in Hollis. When the federal government starts offering loans to Depression-plagued developers, Fred is first in line—and soon he has an army of shovel-wielding workers digging 450 foundations out of the East Flatbush swampland.

As rows of mass-produced “Trump Homes” spread across Brooklyn and Queens, the papers call Fred the Henry Ford of home building. Later, when the scandals start to come out—the charges of profiteering, and fraud, and banning black tenants—the papers find other things to call him. Infamy attends each new triumph. By the 1950s, he has built thousands of houses and apartments, and become the kind of landlord Woody Guthrie writes songs about.

When the time comes to plan his own succession, Fred turns first to his eldest son and namesake. But Fred Jr. has no feel for the business—he’s soft and free-spirited, and wants to fly airplanes. Donald is the one with a taste for combat, and to him the great unconquered frontier lies across the East River. Donald sees more than money in Manhattan. He sees fame, status, entrée into elite society—things the Trumps have never had.

The market on the island is crowded and hostile, but Fred and Donald work closely to plot their invasion. Together, they cook books, fleece investors, and fool one regulator after another. Some of the scion’s schemes pay off. Others prove disastrous. But his signal achievement is forging the Donald Trump persona itself—that high-flying playboy, that self-made man, that larger-than-life titan the tabloids can’t resist. It’s a creation of both father and son, and it will do more for the family business than any casino or skyscraper.

Today a photo of Fred sits in the Oval Office, looking out on an empire much vaster and more powerful than even he could have imagined. And while the president writes his chapter in history, the next generation waits in the wings, jockeying for position, feuding over status, knowing only one of them can be the heir.

I.

They stood shoulder to shoulder—Don Jr., Ivanka, Jared, and Eric—watching the conquest unfold on TV. Ohio was theirs. Then North Carolina and Florida, too. The vaunted midwestern “blue wall” was crumbling on live TV, as ashen-faced pundits muttered about the electoral map. The scene was surreal, and delicious.

While Don and Eric fielded congratulatory text messages, some in the room noticed Ivanka cut through the thick scrum of campaign aides and attach herself to her father’s side. “Did you hear that, Dad?” she asked whenever the TV delivered good news, expertly guarding his attention just as she had since she was a young girl.

Around midnight, the family realized they would need a victory speech. No one had bothered to write one, because Trump wasn’t supposed to win—at least not electorally. He was supposed to go down in a spectacular blaze of made-for-TV martyrdom that all of them could capitalize on. Ivanka had a book coming out. Don and Eric were working on a line of patriotically themed budget hotels. And preliminary talks were under way to launch a Trump-branded TV network that would turn disgruntled voters into viewers. Now they needed a new plan.

One by one, they retreated from the buzzing hive on the 14th floor of Trump Tower and rode the elevator up to their father’s penthouse. Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller—sleep-deprived and pulsing with adrenaline—began punching out a draft for the president-elect to read. But Ivanka took one glance over Miller’s shoulder and concluded that it wouldn’t do. (Someone who read it later summed up the tone as “We won; fuck you.”) The next act of the Trump story was beginning tonight. This was a task for family.

Gathered around the dining-room table with a coterie of aides and allies, Trump’s three oldest children took turns dictating while the speechwriter typed. The final product—a laundry list of *thank you*s interspersed with patriotic platitudes—was notable only for its un-Trumpian restraint. With his family lined up behind him onstage, Trump intoned, “I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be president for all Americans.”

The speech was bland and forgettable, but hall-of-fame oratory wasn’t the goal. The remarks were a placeholder, a chance for the family to work out their next moves. “They’re undeniably adaptable,” Kellyanne Conway, a senior adviser to the president, told me of Trump’s children. “When the family business was real estate, they learned contracts and building approvals and architecture. Then it was television, and they learned that industry. Now, a decade later, they’ve turned around and learned politics.”

But this latest reinvention has set off a power struggle within the first family, one that has played out largely away from public view. The president and his children—who declined to be interviewed for this story—have labored to project an image of unity. But over the past several months, I spoke with dozens of people close to the Trumps, including friends, former employees, White House officials, and campaign aides. The succession battle they described is marked by old grievances, petty rivalries—and deceptively high stakes.

In his brief time on the political stage, Donald Trump has commandeered the national conservative movement, remade the Republican Party in his image, and used his office to confer untold value on the Trump brand.

Between their business holdings and their political influence, the Trumps could remain a fixture of American life for generations. The question now dividing the president's children is not just which one of them will get to take up the mantle when he's gone—but how the family will attempt to shape the country in the years ahead.

FOR A NATION FOUNDED IN REVOLT against monarchy, the United States excels at preserving its own royalty. Once a name and fortune are made, the machinery of American power churns into gear. Wealth is passed down through trusts. Important jobs flow to unaccomplished heirs. Famous families get mythologized in the media, celebrated in the culture. The result is a ruling class dominated by dynasties—from the Rockefellers to the Roosevelts, the Mellons to the Murdochs.

Members of these clans tend to justify their privilege by claiming to uphold a tradition of patriotism and public service passed down by their forebears—a refrain that has echoed especially throughout America's most durable political dynasty.

The Trumps like to invoke the Kennedys in their own mythmaking. The president has called Melania “our own Jackie O.” Ivanka's husband, Jared Kushner, whose father reportedly sees himself as a “Jewish Joe Kennedy,” had a framed photo of JFK in his Manhattan office. And close Ivanka watchers have noted that her Instagram feed—filled with idyllic photos of family life against the backdrop of the White House—has a certain Camelotian quality.

But if Camelot was always a romantic facade, the Trumps have dropped the ennobling pretense. Like a fun-house-mirror version of the Kennedys, they reel across the national stage swapping the language of duty and sacrifice for that of grievance and quid pro quo. *Ask not what your country can do for you, they seem to say; ask what your country can do for the Trumps.*

In considering which of his children should carry on his legacy, Trump is now caught between competing visions for the future of the family—one defined by a desire for elite approval, the other by an instinct for stoking populist rage.

But Stephen Hess, a scholar who studies American political dynasties, says succession can be unpredictable in presidential families. Unlike in business, where a patriarch can simply install his chosen heir as CEO, politicians often see their best-laid plans upended by voters: Think of the Bushes anointing brainy, well-behaved Jeb, only to have George W. surprise everyone by beating him to the White House.

For Trump—a distant and domineering father who has long pitted his offspring against one another—the unsettling reality is that the choice of who will succeed him may be out of his control.

II.

The Trump children grew up surrounded by the trappings of dynasty. Their home was an eponymous skyscraper—all glass and gold and capital letters—that doubled as a symbol of their family's power. Famous surnames can have an enveloping effect on those who carry them, flattening every outside aspiration until the family is all that matters. To young Don, Ivanka, and Eric, the whole world felt as if it could fit within Trump Tower.

From afar, their lives looked like a *Richie Rich*-style fantasy. They had an entire floor of the triplex penthouse to themselves, with rooms full of toys and big-screen TVs, and nannies and bodyguards attending to their whims. Michael Jackson, their neighbor, stopped by to play video games. Limousines shepherded them around the city.

But within the family their father cultivated a Darwinian dynamic. On ski trips, when they raced down the mountain, Trump would jab at his children with a pole to get ahead of them. His favorite fatherly maxim was “Don't trust anyone”—and he liked to test his children by asking whether they trusted *him*. If they said yes, they were reprimanded. Sibling rivalry flourished. “We were sort of bred to be competitive,” Ivanka said in 2004. “Dad encourages it.” (Tiffany and Barron, born later to different mothers, seem to have been spared from this contest.)

For Trump's three oldest kids, the defining drama of their childhoods came in 1990, when he left their mother for Marla Maples, moving out of the penthouse amid a tabloid feeding frenzy. Eric, then 6, was too young to fully grasp what was happening, but his siblings understood, and they reacted in different ways. Don, who was 12, lashed out at his father—“How can you say you love us?” he reportedly spat during an argument—and refused to talk to him for a year. Eight-year-old Ivanka was afraid of what she might lose in the divorce. “Does it mean I'm not going to be Ivanka Trump anymore?” she asked, tearfully.

In the years that followed, Don seemed to define himself in opposition to his father. Trump loved golf, so Don stayed off the links. Trump was a teetotaler, so Don drank heavily. In his college fraternity, he developed a reputation for blacking out. “He was drinking himself into a really dark place,” said one former fraternity brother, who recalled Don breaking down in tears at a party as he talked about his father. “He hated what his dad did to his mom. For a while, he didn't even want people to know his last name.” (A spokesperson for Don said: “This is fiction.”)

Ivanka, meanwhile, worked to stay close with her father. She stopped by his office every day after the divorce, and when she was at boarding school she called home often—seeking his advice, and asking questions about the

Campaign staffers grumbled that Ivanka's policy preferences were more closely aligned with Aspen weekenders than Rust Belt voters.

family business. Later, Ivanka would recall with pride how her dad interrupted important meetings to talk to her: “He’d always take my call.”

ON JUNE 16, 2015, IVANKA strode across a dais in the atrium of Trump Tower and beamed out at the crowd. “Welcome, everybody,” she said, a glint of amusement in her voice. “Today, I have the honor of introducing a man who needs no introduction.”

That Donald Trump had chosen Ivanka to feature so prominently at his campaign kickoff seemed natural. He’d been grooming her for years to take over the family empire. She was the golden child—beautiful, telegenic, and in possession of that most important family trait: a compulsive image-consciousness.

According to an aide who helped launch Trump’s presidential bid, Ivanka was the one child for whom he voiced concern while he was deciding whether to run. “I know they’re gonna go after me for the women,” Trump told the aide. “The problem is, they’re gonna go after Ivanka, too, for the ex-boyfriends.” His daughter’s romantic history included a succession of problematic exes—from Lance Armstrong to James “Bingo” Gubelmann, a D-list film producer who would later be arrested on cocaine charges with Maroon 5’s bassist.

Ivanka had a brand to protect, something Trump understood. She’d been tending to her image since she was a teenager—carefully evolving the Ivanka persona from party-girl socialite to lean-in lifestyle guru. She had her own fashion line and a flagship boutique in SoHo. Alongside Jared—another real-estate scion—she had wedged herself into Upper East Side society, earning invites to exclusive charity functions and a cameo on *Gossip Girl*.

Ivanka may not have thought her father could win the presidency, but she chose to treat the campaign as a brand-enhancement vehicle. She posed for glossy magazines, and sat for soft-focus interviews on *Good Morning America*. After speaking at the Republican National Convention, she served her Twitter followers a link to the pink sheath dress she’d worn onstage and encouraged them to “shop Ivanka’s look.” The dress sold out within 24 hours, a sign of the broader strategy’s success: In the first half of 2016, *Fast Company* reported, net sales at her clothing line were up nearly \$12 million.



Donald Trump with his three oldest children and his then-wife, Ivana, in 1988

Navigating the campaign this way required finesse. Ivanka kept her distance from the uncouth rallies in places like Reno, Nevada, and Toledo, Ohio. While Trump riled up the country with Muslim-ban proposals and Mexican-rapist panics, she perched herself on a higher plane, where she just wanted to talk about the issues that *really mattered to her*, like affordable child care and the gender pay gap. Campaign staffers grumbled that Ivanka’s policy preferences were more closely aligned with Aspen weekenders than Rust Belt voters. “People started to realize this wasn’t about Trump’s vision,” one former aide told me. “It was about Ivanka’s ability to feel comfortable in her New York circle.”

But few were willing to challenge her. Rumors swirled that a state-level staffer had been fired after displeasing Ivanka. True or not—a spokesperson for Ivanka declined to comment—the story reinforced an impression that the candidate’s favorite child was untouchable. “It all felt very Tudor,” said the former aide. “Aside from whispers in the bathroom, nobody would dare say anything bad about Ivanka. It was the kind of thing that would get you tarred and feathered.”

While Ivanka soaked up the spotlight, Don was consigned to the margins of the campaign. The two had long been a study in contrasts. Where she whispered, he shouted; where she was careful, he was reckless. Unlike Ivanka—who couldn’t wait to follow her dad into real estate—Don had taken a more leisurely

path to the family business after college, bartending and bumming around Colorado for a year and a half while his father seethed.

With his slicked-back hair and pin-striped suits, Don had carried a certain fratty energy into adulthood that periodically got him into trouble. (In 2002, *Page Six* reported that he got a beer stein to the head at a New York comedy club after some patrons thought he was “reacting too enthusiastically to [Chris Rock’s] ethnic humor.”) He spent weekdays working at the Trump Organization, where he developed a millionaire’s belief in low taxes, and weekends in the wilderness with his hunting buddies, where he gained an appreciation for gun rights. As a result, Don came to conservatism years before the rest of his family.

Yet when Don offered to help his father’s campaign, many of the tasks he received had a whiff of condescension. Trump had always been embarrassed by his son’s hunting, especially after photos emerged in 2012 of Don posing with the severed tail of an elephant he’d slain in Zimbabwe. But now that the candidate was wooing rural Republicans, he was happy to let Don put on that goofy orange vest and shoot at stuff for the cameras. “You can finally do something for me,” Trump told Don, according to a former aide.

Don had long ago come to understand that Ivanka was his father’s favorite. “Daddy’s little girl!” he liked to joke. But making peace with her husband’s status in the family was harder. Ever since Ivanka had married Jared, Don had been made to watch as this effete, soft-spoken interloper cozied up to his dad. “The brothers thought Jared was a yes-man,” said a former Trump adviser. “Don, especially, looked at him as very suspect.”

But Ivanka and Jared’s real power was rooted in Trump’s aspirations for the family. The couple stood as avatars for the elite respectability he’d spent his life futilely chasing. They belonged to a world that had long excluded him, dined in penthouses where he’d been derided as a nouveau riche rube. Cultivated and urbane, they embodied the high-class, patrician ideal he so desperately wanted the Trump name to evoke.

Don—the screwup, the blowhard, the *hunter*—didn’t stand a chance.



Trump with Ivanka in 1991

TENSIONS BETWEEN DON AND Jared sharpened in the spring of 2016, as it became clear that Trump was going to fire his campaign manager. With Corey Lewandowski on the way out, Don and Jared each began vying for larger roles in the campaign, according to two Republican operatives who worked for Trump.

People close to the candidate knew he would never entrust his campaign to his son—Don’s chances of taking the reins were “less than zero,” a former adviser told me. But Don seemed like the last one to realize it. He hustled to prove that he was up to the task, swapping texts and emails with anyone who said they could help his dad’s candidacy. It was during this period that Don set up a meeting with a Russian lawyer who claimed to have dirt on Hillary Clinton. “The Trump Tower meeting was Don’s move to take over the campaign,” a former aide told me. “He was trying to show his father he was competent.” (The spokesperson for Don said: “More fiction.”)

The full extent of the mess Don was making wouldn’t be clear for another year. But even in the moment, the meeting was a bust. The Russians rambled about adoption policy, Jared emailed his assistant looking for an excuse to leave, and no useful intel was produced. Don had wasted everybody’s time.

Jared and Ivanka took a savvier approach to consolidating power, cultivating the new campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, as an ally. By the fall, Jared was traveling virtually full-time with Trump on his private plane, while Don was sent to stump in far-flung states no one else had time for. “I just wake up in the morning and go to

whatever city they tell me to,” Don complained during one trip, according to a travel companion. “Jared’s the smart one. He has it all figured out.”

But Don discovered that he had a knack for campaigning. Bounding into county fairs and hunting expos in boots and blue jeans, he dazzled crowds with his knowledge of duck blinds and fly-fishing—sounding more like a Trump voter than a Trump. He thrived in the shouty, testosterone-soaked realm of #MAGA Twitter, where his provocations routinely went viral. Don’s habit of amplifying memes from the right-wing fever swamps generated controversy. (One infamous tweet compared Syrian refugees to poisonous Skittles; another featured the alt-right mascot Pepe the Frog.) But it also helped turn him into a kind of Breitbartian folk hero. “He’s one of the bros,” Mike Cernovich, a popular far-right social-media personality, told me. “He has a classically masculine personality, and you don’t feel like he’s a snob. He really likes the meme culture—it’s not fake for him.”

Don may have lost the inside game to Jared and Ivanka, but he was building a grassroots base of his own. When fans began calling on him to run for mayor of New York City—and Don responded with a bit too much enthusiasm—his father quickly shut it down. “Don’s not going to run for mayor,” he said in an interview with Sean Hannity. But Trump couldn’t put an end to his son’s political career that easily. By the end of the election, Don’s budding #MAGA stardom was undeniable—and he had no intention of walking away. “Going back to doing deals is boring,” he reportedly told a gathering of gun enthusiasts. “The politics bug bit me.”

III.

With the election over and the presidency in hand, the Trumps got to work doing what they did with any new asset: figuring out how to sell it. Their initial cash grabs were clumsy and relatively small-scale. When the soon-to-be first family was profiled by *60 Minutes*, Ivanka’s jewelry line blasted out a “Style Alert”

advertising the \$10,800 bracelet she’d worn on air. When Trump met with the prime minister of Japan, Ivanka—who was pursuing a licensing deal with a Japanese apparel conglomerate—sat in on the meeting. As *ProPublica* would later reveal, she also helped ensure that a portion of her father’s inauguration budget was spent at the Trump International Hotel in Washington.

Eric and Don—tasked with running the Trump Organization while their father was away—looked for their own angles. They doubled the membership fee at Mar-a-Lago, which was already being described as the “winter White House,” and pushed forward on the development of their down-market hotel

chain, American Idea. Working with a pair of Mississippi businessmen they’d met on the campaign trail, the Trumps planned a series of red-state budget hotels stuffed with star-spangled tchotchkes and decorative Americana, such as vintage Coca-Cola machines in the lobbies.

Eric in particular welcomed the challenge of running the family business. He’d always been the one most interested in construction and architecture, and many in the company assumed that he would take over day-to-day operations when his father retired. Now that he had a chance to prove himself, Eric planned to exploit every opportunity. “The stars have aligned,” he proclaimed. “Our brand is the hottest it has ever been.”

Jared, meanwhile, was busy attending to his own brand. When the December 20, 2016, issue of *Forbes* hit newsstands, the cover featured Trump’s favored son-in-law—his arms folded, his lapels peaked, his hair a perfect coif—

grinning triumphantly above a headline that seemed tailored to torment Don and Eric: “THIS GUY GOT TRUMP ELECTED.” Inside, readers were introduced to a heretofore unfamiliar version of Jared: the visionary strategist who had run the Trump campaign like a “stealth Silicon Valley startup.”

The brazen credit-grabbing rankled people who’d worked on the campaign. “He never sacrificed or risked a thing,” a former staffer complained. “Then, after the win, he came in to grab the spoils and anoint himself grand pooh-bah. It was gross.” Don and Eric were similarly vexed, according to people close to the family.

Jared had wasted little time in wielding his influence. Just days after the election, he’d persuaded Trump to fire Chris Christie as the head of the transition team. Christie had been the federal prosecutor responsible for putting Jared’s father behind bars a decade earlier, and the dismissal was widely interpreted as an act of vengeance. But the shake-up also gave Jared a strategic advantage, allowing him to exert control over hiring for the new administration.

Don was not happy with this arrangement. More than once, according to aides familiar with the process, he would recommend someone for a job only to have Jared intervene and insist that personnel decisions be run through him. Worse, Jared seemed intent on staffing the Trump White House like it was a charter jet to Davos. He recruited Gary Cohn, a Goldman Sachs executive and registered Democrat, to serve as the president’s chief economic adviser. He lobbied for Steven Mnuchin, a hedge-funder cum Hollywood producer, to be named Treasury secretary. Don managed to usher a handful of loyalists into his father’s administration—but Jared and Ivanka ended up with many more.

People close to Trump speculated about what Jared was hoping to get out of all this. Some thought he was simply seizing the chance to fill his Rolodex with world leaders and Wall Street titans. Others would later point to a sweetheart deal his family cut with a Qatari investment firm as evidence that Jared’s involvement in foreign policy had a profit motive. (A spokesman for Jared denied this.)

Whatever the reason, the couple’s headlong dive into politics proved difficult to reconcile with Ivanka’s brand. As the inauguration approached, she

Trump reportedly began telling allies, “Jared hasn’t been so good for me,” and lamenting that Ivanka could have married Tom Brady.

found herself under siege on the Upper East Side. A horde of New York artists—including some whose work she personally collected—gathered outside a downtown building where she kept an apartment to protest her role in Trump’s “fascist” agenda. Activists launched a viral Instagram campaign juxtaposing her glamour shots with appeals from frightened constituents: “Dear Ivanka, I’ve been raped and I need to have an abortion”; “Dear Ivanka, I’m afraid of the swastikas spray painted on my park.”

This struck Ivanka as profoundly unfair. *She*—the author of a forthcoming book on women in the workplace and frequent participant in female-empowerment luncheons—was a misogynist? *She*—a convert to orthodox Judaism and supporter of numerous respected Jewish charities—was an anti-Semite? What did these people expect her to do, disown her father?

But as much as the attacks bothered Ivanka, they also made something clear: The White House wasn’t going to boost her lifestyle business—if anything, the coming years would politicize it beyond repair. To take advantage of this moment, she would need to think bigger. Fortunately for Ivanka, A-list celebrities and thought leaders were now flocking to her. Leonardo DiCaprio, Sheryl Sandberg, Anne-Marie Slaughter—all of them wanted a spot on her calendar. She didn’t need to sell handbags or luxury condos to command the attention of America’s elite. Her proximity to the Oval Office was enough.

The week before Trump entered the White House, Ivanka announced that she was taking a leave of absence from the Trump Organization and her fashion line. The seat of the family empire wasn’t in Manhattan anymore. It was in Washington—and that’s where she and Jared would be.

IV.

The American presidency has always been shaped, for better or worse, by unelected family members. Hillary Clinton was the architect of her husband’s health-care plan. Bobby Kennedy served as his

brother’s attorney general. Eleanor Roosevelt traveled the country on behalf of her wheelchair-bound husband to survey New Deal programs, and Edith Wilson is said to have effectively run the White House after Woodrow suffered a stroke.

Still, modern presidents do not, as a rule, hire their children to work in the West Wing. So when, in March 2017, Trump made Ivanka an assistant to the president, and Jared a senior adviser, the appointments attracted more than a few critics. Some compared Trump to a third-world autocrat stacking his regime with relatives. But Ivanka was certain the naysayers would thank her in the end.

Her confidence was not unreasonable. People close to the Trump family had long marveled at how Ivanka handled her father. The playful *Aw, Dad* eye rolls, the giggles at his jokes, the strategically deployed fawning followed by

subtly asked-for favors—these little performances, honed over a lifetime, had taken on an almost mythical quality among Trump’s friends and employees, who say no one’s better at getting what they want from him.

The presidential agenda Ivanka envisioned was one her former Manhattan neighbors would approve of. With her help, Trump would enact a paid-family-leave program and reform the criminal-justice system. He would update the nation’s infrastructure, and preserve LGBTQ rights. *Republican, Democrat*, these were just labels. Once fair-minded people saw what her father had accomplished—what *the Trumps* had accomplished—the family’s legacy would be secure.

The first test of Ivanka’s persuasive powers came when White House officials began drafting an executive order focused on expanding protections for religious conservatives. Ivanka, who knew the order would be seen as anti-LGBTQ,

enlisted Tim Cook—the gay Apple CEO, whose respect her father craved—to lobby Trump against signing it, according to a former White House aide. She also privately reminded her father that Vice President Mike Pence had faced nasty political blowback when he’d stumbled into a religious-freedom culture war as governor of Indiana.

Ivanka’s crusade culminated one night in the president’s private study, where Trump was discussing the issue with a small group of advisers. A former aide who was present at the meeting recalled Pence launching into an impassioned defense of the executive order, only to have Trump cut him off. “Mike, isn’t this the shit that got you in trouble in Indiana?” he snapped. Pence quickly retreated as blood rushed to his face. It was clear to all in the room that Ivanka—standing quietly in the corner—had won. When Trump did eventually sign the order, it had been dramatically watered down.

But as time went on, Trump began to tire of Ivanka and Jared’s incessant lobbying. Every time he turned around, they were nagging him about something new—refugees one day, education the next. *It never stopped*. Their efforts to change his mind about the Paris climate accord exasperated the president, who took to mocking their arguments when they weren’t around. “They’re New York liberals,” he would say, according to a former White House aide. “Of course that’s what they think.”

When the president withdrew from the Paris Agreement in June 2017, the illusion of Ivanka the Trump whisperer collapsed. “Look, It’s Time to Collectively and Officially Give Up on Ivanka Trump,” *Vogue* declared. “Ivanka Trump is never going to come through,” a *New York Times* op-ed announced. *Vanity Fair* published a savage story about her and Jared’s early adventures in elite Washington, where they were widely regarded as dilettantes. “What is off-putting about them,” one politico told the magazine, “is they do not grasp their essential irrelevance. They think they are special.”

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Ivanka seemed consumed by her coverage. Omarosa Manigault Newman, who worked in the White House for the first year of the administration, recalled Ivanka derailing a senior staff meeting to complain about a *Saturday Night Live* sketch that portrayed her as the face of a perfume named “Complicit.” “Ivanka was thin-skinned,” Newman wrote in her memoir, “and could not seem to take a joke.”

Ivanka’s favorite-child status had long been tied to the good press she generated for her dad. “For Trump, everything comes back to optics,” Cliff Sims, a former White House aide, told me. “She is the archetype of what he wants—the most beautiful face, the most buttoned-up message, everything just exactly the way it should be.” But as Ivanka became a less attractive surrogate, Trump’s patience with her and her husband waned. A news story about Jared using a private email server to conduct government business prompted a presidential meltdown in the Oval Office. “How could he be so stupid?” Trump fumed, according to a White House official who was present. “That’s what Hillary did!”

Trump reportedly began telling allies, “Jared hasn’t been so good for me,” and lamenting—in jest, perhaps, though no one could say for sure—that Ivanka could have married Tom Brady instead. More than once, the president wished aloud that the couple would move back to New York.

Ivanka reacted to her sudden loss of influence by affecting an airy, just-a-daughter pose. “I try to stay out of politics,” she said in an interview with Fox News—a puzzling claim for a White House official. To those who knew her, it was clear she was disoriented. For the first time since she was a girl, her privileged place in the family seemed uncertain.

So when, in July of 2017, Don’s ill-conceived Trump Tower meeting with the Russians became public—putting Jared in jeopardy—the couple did what they had to do. Jared released an 11-page statement effectively blaming the radioactive meeting on his brother-in-law while absolving himself. In a gratuitous bit of knife-twisting, he recounted emailing an assistant, “Can u pls call me on my cell? Need excuse to get out of meeting.”

The statement infuriated Don, according to family friends—not just for the way it threw him under the bus, but for the way it belittled him. But Jared’s maneuver worked on the audience that mattered most.

Watching cable-news coverage of the fiasco from the West Wing, Trump shook his head wearily. “He wasn’t angry at Don,” a former White House official recalled. “It was more like he was resigned to his son’s idiocy.”

“He’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer,” Trump said with a sigh.

V.

Saturday Night Live has a running bit in which Trump’s two eldest sons appear in tandem, with Don portrayed as the smart, responsible big brother and Eric as a kind of bumbling man-child. In an episode last year, Don answered questions about the Russia investigation while Eric ate Play-Doh. Real-life Don seems to delight in these sketches, and has even publicly volunteered to come on the show to play himself. But within the Trump family, associates say, the brothers’ roles are exactly reversed.

Sequestered in Trump Tower, Don spent the first year of his father’s presidency as a kind of armchair pundit, watching the news on TV and firing off tweets. He showed little interest in running the Trump Organization with

Eric and longed instead for the political arena. But he rarely called his dad at the White House—“I feel ridiculous bothering him,” he told a reporter—and his dad called him even less. In fact, no one in the first family took Don’s political ideas seriously, least of all Jared and Ivanka. “You never heard them say, ‘We’ve got to get Don Jr.’s opinion on this,’” a former White House official told me.

In private, Don complained that the West Wing had been overrun by Democrats, and griped that even the true believers were too passive. Having immersed himself in the online meme wars, Don seemed to believe the White House’s woes could be solved with the kind of aggressive lib-owning that came so naturally to him. Instead, his father had put his faith in a timid preppy. When photos were released of Jared in Iraq in the spring of 2017, sporting a flak jacket over his oxford shirt and blazer, Don spent the afternoon trading gleeful text messages with friends about the Martha’s Vineyard-meets-Mosul getup.

But beneath all Don’s carping was a more personal grievance: While Jared and Ivanka moved freely through the West Wing, he was stuck on the outside, his face pressed up against the glass.

EVERYBODY WHO WORKS FOR TRUMP learns sooner or later that imitating him will only draw his contempt. The tragedy of Don Jr. is that he seems never to have learned this lesson. As his mother has recalled, Trump resisted when she wanted to name their first son after him: “You can’t do that!” he protested. “What if he’s a loser?” That Don went on to confirm his father’s fear largely by trying to mimic him—in temperament, style, speech, and career—points to the unique difficulties of being the president’s namesake.

In March 2018, *Page Six* reported that Don’s wife, Vanessa, was filing for divorce after 12 years of marriage. The echoes from his childhood were hard to ignore. The couple had five kids—including a daughter who was about the same age he’d been when his parents split up—and the tabloids were circling.

Hoping to spare their children from the media circus Don had experienced, he and Vanessa committed to keep their no-contest proceedings quiet. He told his publicist he didn’t care what reporters wrote about him, but requested that they respect his kids’ privacy and keep in mind that some of them were old enough to read.

Trump had been ambivalent about Don’s wife. (Some traced his doubts back to her teenage romance with a member of the Latin Kings gang; others pointed to an oft-retold story about Vanessa meeting Don’s dad at a fashion show and later joking that he was “retarded.”) But the president was even less enthusiastic when his son started dating Kimberly Guilfoyle.

The Fox News host had lobbied to become White House press secretary early in the administration, but Trump had shown little interest, according to two former aides. “Even he can tell the difference between the attractive women on Fox who have a little bit of substance, and those who will be derided

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as airheads,” one aide said. Now she was gallivanting across the gossip pages with his son, and posing for photos on the South Lawn.

The family was friendly to Guilfoyle in person, but there were signs of disapproval. One source told me that after her attendance at a White House Fourth of July party sparked a round of fawning press coverage—upstaging Jared and Ivanka—Don was contacted by an official informing him that he would need to clear his guests the next time he visited. And as Thanksgiving approached, the president made it known that Guilfoyle wasn’t welcome to join the family at Mar-a-Lago, two Trump associates told me. (Spokespeople for the White House and Don denied this.)

Some suspected that the president was simply fed up with the distraction the relationship posed. But according to one longtime Trump adviser, there may have been another reason for his displeasure. Over the years, Trump had frequently made suggestive comments about Guilfoyle’s attractiveness, the adviser told me, and more than once inquired about whom she was dating.

But while Trump may have been less than thrilled about the relationship, among rank-and-file right-wingers “Donberly”—as the couple nicknamed themselves—was a hit. Appearing side by side at Republican rallies, they bantered about each other’s pet names—she was “Pooh Bear,” he was “Junior Mint”—and railed against Democrats. They went on hunting trips and posted selfies with rifles on social media. Fans on Twitter began referring to Guilfoyle as the “future first lady,” and she made little effort to tamp down the speculation.

When an interviewer on *Breitbart News*’s radio show made a comment about Don’s political potential, Guilfoyle didn’t hesitate: “I think he’s the No. 1 up-and-coming political figure, for sure, on the right.”

VI.

As the 2018 midterm elections approached, Don decided to get serious about politics. He hired the Republican strategist Andrew Surabian to help shape his press coverage, and began fielding requests to join candidates on the campaign trail.

Crisscrossing the country with Guilfoyle in the year that followed, Don emerged as a veritable right-wing phenom. At the University of Georgia, more than 2,000 young Republicans lined up to hear him speak. At the Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland, he was swarmed by fans clamoring for selfies and autographs. Charlie Kirk, the founder of the student organization Turning Point USA, recalled a summit in West Palm Beach that featured conservative A-listers such as Tucker Carlson, Greg Gutfeld, and Jordan Peterson. Don drew a bigger crowd than any of them.

To the surprise of many in elite GOP circles, he also excelled at schmoozing wealthy donors, raising millions of dollars for conservatives in closed-door fundraisers. “He’s as good in a room of six people as he is in a room of

6,000,” says Tommy Hicks Jr., a co-chair of the Republican National Committee and a friend of Don’s.

But the stump was where Don really shined. Taking the stage to wild applause from riled-up MAGA-heads, he riffed and ranted and cracked jokes about gender identity. To watch Don in these settings was to see a man morphing into his father—the vocal inflection,

the puckered half-smirk, the staccato “Who knows?” punctuating key sentences. It was as though he had studied his dad’s delivery, practicing each tic in the mirror.

By November 2018, Don had appeared at more than 70 campaign events across 17 states—and powerful Republicans were abuzz. “I could very easily see him entering politics,” Senator Kevin Cramer told me. “I think his future is bright,” said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy. Newsmax’s CEO, Chris Ruddy, told me he’d personally

encouraged Don to run for office; Sean Hannity called him “a born natural leader.” Senator Rand Paul went so far as to say that Don was one of the best Republican campaigners in the country. “If you can’t get the president,” Paul told me, “he’s a close second.”

Notably, many of these Republicans seemed less enthusiastic about his sister. Cramer, for example, spent 15 minutes in a phone interview gushing to me about Don’s “accessibility” and “irreverence” and gift for “connecting” with voters. But when I asked him about Ivanka, he paused. “She’s a little bit harder to get,” he replied, politely. “Her faith prevents her from traveling on the Sabbath.” Charlie Kirk was similarly careful when we spoke. While all of Trump’s adult children were helpful to the cause, he told me, “I can honestly say that outside of his father, Don is the No. 1 most requested speaker, and he brings the most energy to the conservative base.”

None of this newfound excitement about Don seemed to rub off on the president, however. People close to Trump told me he remained enchanted by the idea of Ivanka as the inheritor of his political legacy. During trips to Mar-a-Lago, he was often heard rhapsodizing about her potential to be the first female president. Don’s political prospects, if they came up at all, were treated as an afterthought. If there was any doubt about which child Trump favored, his Twitter feed told the story: In the first two years of his presidency, he tweeted about Ivanka 16 times, while Don received just four mentions—all of them about the Trump Tower scandal.

Trump floated Ivanka for various prestigious jobs, including United Nations ambassador and head of the World Bank. When Washington snickered, she settled for a more amorphous role that let her travel

To watch Don on the stump was to see a man morphing into his father—the vocal inflection, the puckered half-smirk, the staccato “Who knows?”

the world to speak on pet issues. She appeared onstage with Angela Merkel in Berlin, and addressed a conference on women's empowerment in Tokyo. On a trip to Africa, she wore flowy dresses as she laughed and danced (and posed for photos) with Ethiopian women. She even began to claw her way out of Upper East Side exile, thanks to her high-profile advocacy for the Republican tax bill—which slashed rates for the rich, and the corporations they owned. “As people got richer, [Ivanka and Jared] started getting

to someone familiar with the conversation. (Spokespeople for Don and Ivanka disputed this account and denied that there is a rift between them.)

WHILE HIS SIBLINGS JOCKEYED FOR POLITICAL position, Eric spent most of his days at Trump Tower. Don was still technically on the company's payroll,



Trump and Don Jr. with Fred Trump (standing) in the Plaza Hotel in 1988

welcomed back in by their old friends,” says Emily Jane Fox, a *Vanity Fair* reporter who wrote a book about the Trumps.

But as Don's visibility grew, the cold war between him and Ivanka intensified. Now that each had their own teams of allies and advisers, they had grown paranoid that the other's henchmen were planting damaging stories about them in the press. A few days before the midterms, *McClatchy* published a story under the headline “Trump Kids on the Campaign Trail: Don Jr. Wows, Ivanka Disappoints.” Ivanka's camp was enraged, and suspected that Don was behind the story. Later, Don confronted Ivanka over rumors that her team was undermining him in off-the-record conversations with reporters. “Tell your people to stop trashing me to the media,” he said, according

but between hunting trips and campaign stops, his presence in the office was irregular at best.

Running the Trump Organization during the Trump presidency had turned out to be more difficult than Eric had imagined. After an initial burst of postelection activity, many of the family's most ambitious plans collapsed. They were forced to scrap their American Idea hotel chain after ethics concerns were raised. International building projects were delayed amid outcry from watchdog groups. Valuable retail space in Trump Tower sat

empty month after month, and socially conscious condo owners called for the Trump name to be scraped off their buildings.

Meanwhile, at Mar-a-Lago, patrons whispered that “the boys” were draining the club of its class with cost-cutting measures after numerous charities canceled functions there. When a rumor went forth that Eric had ordered lower-quality steaks to be served at the restaurant, members erupted in outrage: *His father never would have allowed this.*

Eric blamed the Trump Organization’s setbacks on partisan politics. “We live in a climate where everything will be used against us,” he told *The Washington Post*. But within the president’s orbit, there was a growing sense that his sons were driving the company into the ground.

Trump, who’d pledged to recuse himself from business decisions, relied on golf buddies to update him on the company during his weekend trips to Florida. Their reviews seemed to confirm his worst fears. Before launching his campaign, he’d fretted that his kids weren’t ready to take over the business. Now, with Don MIA and Eric flailing, he became preoccupied with what would be left of his company when he returned to it. According to a former White House aide, Trump talked about the issue so often that administration officials worried he would get himself in trouble trying to run the Trump Organization from the Oval Office.

But as the 2020 campaign season entered its early stages, even Eric turned his attention toward politics. His wife, Lara—a conservative activist from North Carolina—was an outspoken surrogate for Trump. Eric had been holding back, worried that his father would disapprove; after all, someone needed to mind the shop. But the president encouraged Eric to join his siblings in the fray. There would be plenty of ways to cash in later. This was the family business now.

VII.

Watching Trump’s children appear on Fox News, one gets the sense that they’re still auditioning for their father’s affection. Ivanka speaks in dulcet tones about how proud, *so proud*, she is of her dad. Don bashes the “fake-news media” with performative force. Eric, the least camera-ready of the three, clings to talking points, lavishing praise on Trump whenever he gets stuck. (In an interview earlier this year, Eric repeated variations of “He’s the greatest guy in the world” in such reverential tones that even Sean Hannity seemed uncomfortable with the obsequiousness.)

Trump watches these segments from the West Wing and offers a running commentary to whoever is around, according to a former aide. His attitude toward each of his adult children on any given day is shaped by how they are playing on cable news. Ivanka tends to draw rave reviews, while Don’s are more mixed, with the president muttering things like “Why did he say *that*?” and “He doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Recently, though, his perspective on his two oldest children seems to have shifted.

In June, Ivanka accompanied her father to Osaka, Japan, for the G20 summit. After the meetings, the French government posted a video clip that showed the president’s daughter standing amid a gaggle of side-eyeing world leaders as she tried awkwardly to force her way into the conversation. The clip went viral, spawning a hashtag—#UnwantedIvanka—and a wave of parody Photoshops inserting her into great moments in history: mugging for the camera at the March on Washington, grinning next to Winston Churchill at Yalta. News outlets around the world covered the snub. Pundits called it a damning indictment of Trump’s nepotism, while foreign-policy experts argued that Ivanka’s lack of credibility could harm U.S. diplomacy. A quote from an anonymous Indian diplomat recirculated in the media: “We regard Ivanka Trump the way we do half-wit Saudi princes.”

The episode laid bare the depth of Ivanka’s miscalculation. She had thought when her father took office that the surest path to power and status was to plant herself in the West Wing and mingle with the global elite. But after two and a half years of trying to burnish her credentials as a geopolitical player, Ivanka had become an international punch line. There was, it turned out, no market for a genteel brand of Trumpism.

Don, meanwhile, threw himself into his father’s reelection campaign, while quietly plotting his own future. According to Republicans familiar with the discussions, he considered running for office somewhere in the Mountain West, where his love of guns and hunting could help woo voters. A privately commissioned poll in Montana—passed around enthusiastically among Don’s inner circle—showed that 75 percent of the state’s Republicans viewed him favorably. In April, it was announced that Guilfoyle would join the Trump campaign as a senior adviser.

While Don mulled his options, some allies talked him up as a potential chairman of the Republican National Committee. Others suggested he launch a right-wing political outfit that would allow him to hold rallies and bestow endorsements. The word *kingmaker* started getting tossed around.

Even the president began to appreciate his son’s political value. During a family gathering at the White House, Trump was overheard questioning Don about whether he’d been using the company plane while shirking his day job. A Republican senator in the room intervened to say that without Don’s work on the campaign trail, the party might not have kept its Senate majority. Trump seemed pleased: “I believe it.”

On a steamy June evening, Trump officially launched his bid for reelection with a raucous rally in Orlando. This time, Ivanka and Jared sat in the audience, while Don—the president’s most skilled warm-up act—strutted across the stage to fervid applause. Bellowing into the microphone until his voice went ragged, he crowed about “crushing the bastards of ISIS” and made fun of Joe Biden for “groping” women. As he neared the end of his speech, Don lifted his arms in the air as if conducting an orchestra, and the arena erupted in chants of “Four more years!”

In that moment, there was little question what the future of the Trump family would look like. After a century and a half of striving, they had money, and fame, and unparalleled power. But respectability would remain as distant a mirage as it was when Friedrich was chasing it across the Yukon. While no one knew when Donald Trump would exit the White House, it was clear what he would leave behind when he did: an angry, paranoid scrap of the country eager to buy what he was hawking—and an heir who knew how to keep the con alive. ■

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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“GET A WEAPON”

When a veteran military man gave me that advice
before I left to join U.S. forces in Baghdad,
I thought he meant that I needed a way to protect
myself from the enemy.

By SANDRA SIDI

Illustration by Ben Fearnley



“DUCK AND COVER!” a mechanized voice screamed. The ground shook and the window rattled. I rolled from my bed to the floor of my trailer and felt for the armor I’d forgotten in my office. I lay there and sweated and swore. The voice from the loudspeaker urged me to get away from the windows. I was inside a tin can.

I crawled to the door. My hand was on the knob when I realized I was naked. The next impact knocked the air conditioner to the floor. I grabbed a light-blue cotton robe and bolted.

I raced along a row of sandbags, one hand holding the robe closed. The duck-and-cover bunkers were 100 feet away. Another series of explosions, and I hit the rocks. I was lying there, panting, when I saw a bright-yellow bunker tucked behind a row of sandbags and palm trees. I was up, running, full out. My robe fell open and flew out behind me.

Another hit. I was 20 feet away. Ten. Five. I crashed into the duck-and-cover, yanking my robe closed.

More than a dozen men squatted there and looked at me. Soldiers in military fatigues, some without shirts; contractors in cargo shorts and polos; other men in nothing but boxers. The curly hair on their chests rose and fell with their labored breathing. I should have slept in clothes, but my air conditioner was broken. The rounds hit like deep drums, but we were safe, packed together in 50 square feet of concrete.

I leaned against the wall and tried to stop my legs from shaking. Two more men in boxers joined us. A bearded, sunburned soldier stared at my feet. A half-dressed contractor took furtive looks at my neck. A marine offered me the one chair inside the bunker. “You always say thank you when we buzz you through,” he said, smiling kindly. These men went outside the wire every day, in all that danger, that heat. They were heroes. They were lonely.

The bearded soldier’s eyes met mine and held. He looked away. I pulled my robe tighter.

Finally, the attack ceased, and the sirens quieted. Back in my trailer, I dressed and slipped my embassy ID around my neck. I ran my fingers through my hair and braided it as I left the Riverside Trailer Compound, where I lived, and threaded

through the rows of sandbags, then past the statue of Saddam Hussein, its half-head lying in the sand. Behind me, thick plumes of smoke rose into the sky.

I showed my badge at the palace entrance, coded into my office. I walked past flashing TV sets and translators in headphones typing at their keyboards. When I arrived at my desk, I put my head down. It was 6:30 a.m.

SOME HOURS LATER, my brown ballet flats tapped softly on the marble floor. It was 2007, and the U.S. military and State Department were working out of Saddam’s Republican Palace, in Baghdad. I walked next to a woman I’ll call Morgan, who was new and whom I’d met only the night before. At 23, she was two years older than I was. She wore her long brown hair down, though she wouldn’t for long. The men were excited about her. She carried a Bible, and I remember thinking this would help her.

Men watched as we passed beneath an ornate ceiling of red-and-green marble and rows of glittering chandeliers. The table of women was at the back of the palace dining facility—DFAC to all of us. We couldn’t see one another socially much, with our crazy work schedules, but we walked together whenever possible, and gathered for meals, six or seven of us, our trays loaded with barbecue and biscuits and salads drenched in ranch dressing. We were all happy to see Morgan. Grateful for another young woman to talk to, and perversely relieved by the addition of another female to absorb the male attention.

One of us was State Department, another a civilian analyst, and others military police, or MPs. There was a cropped-haired, soft-voiced woman in the National Guard who dreamed of starting a goat farm. Beside her was a Naval Academy graduate with shin splints and swollen ankles from carrying 80 pounds on 10-mile marches. She could barely pull her boots on. None of us had the security clearance to know what she did. I was a civilian, ferried over by third-party contractors to provide analytical support for Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, the new head of public affairs for the Multi-National Force in Iraq. This was my first job out of college.

Nicole joined us at the table. Ex-Army, she was now a doctoral student and civilian analyst collecting research

on democracy-building in Iraq. “Iraq’s had a real ass-kicking this month,” she announced. “Qahtaniya bombing toll over 500 now.”

Theresa, an MP, mused that we hadn’t figured out how to bring democracy to the Middle East, but we had managed to bring Southern fried chicken and grits. Theresa was tiny, with more positive energy than a sunflower. She did security checks on the perimeter and was Command Sergeant Major Holcomb’s assistant driver.

Two soldiers stood up, craning to get a glance at us. One pointed.

“What do the men gain from it being like this?” That was Silvana (a pseudonym), an economic analyst with several master’s degrees. She’d just filed a sexual-harassment complaint against her supervisor. The food in front of her was untouched, as it often was.

“Before I came here,” said Ann (another pseudonym), the National Guardsman with goat-farm fantasies, “I used to like them—men, I mean.”

Morgan, the newbie, said she’d hoped that she might meet a guy in Iraq, but not so much anymore.

“The odds are good,” Nicole replied, repeating one of her mantras, “but the goods are odd.”

WE CAME FOR love of country, for patriotism, for money. We came to escape debt or marriages. We came because of television—*Alias* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We came for adventure, for service. We came because someone had suggested we wouldn’t dare.

I grew up in the Washington, D.C., area, and, like many of my high-school classmates, I was shaken by the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. Inspired to help my country, I chose political science as my major in college and studied three languages, including Arabic. Just before graduating, I was offered a job by the CIA’s Middle East desk, though I’d have to wait a year or more to get security clearance and would have little control over my assignment. I was thrilled to have been selected by the CIA, but I was also impatient and impulsive, and hadn’t given much thought to exactly what kind of work I wanted to do, or where. So when a government contractor pitched me by phone—*Three weeks and you’ll be in Baghdad*—I said yes.

Before I deployed, I stood in a line with other contractors and soldiers at

Fort Benning, in Georgia, waiting for our physicals. The contractor in front of me wore a shirt with fake blood splattered up the side—a makeshift kidney wound—and the words I'M OKAY at the top. We started talking about his home in St. Petersburg, Florida, which is where my mother lives. We spoke of boats and streetlights and dolphins. He had gray hair and friendly lines around his eyes. He asked where I was headed.

"Baghdad," I said. "The embassy."

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty-two," I lied. My birthday was five months away.

He frowned. "Have they issued you a firearm?" I shook my head. He nodded and looked out at the line of men behind us. The creases in his forehead were like rails of a train track. He turned back to me and leaned close. "A tall blonde? Get a weapon," he said. They called his name. He looked up at the nurse and then back to me. "Get a weapon," he repeated, and walked away.

I'd thought he meant for insurgents.

FROM THE MOMENT I stepped outside my trailer, when I stood in line at the dining hall, when I ran to the duck-and-cover, when I sat at my desk, the male soldiers watched. For some, I was the first woman without a hijab they'd seen in months. Men with enormous hands, with shoulders the width of door frames, with pistols strapped to their thighs—they watched.

I read before I went to Iraq that women made up one in 10 American soldiers in the country, but I had no idea where all those women were. The ratio seemed closer to one in 20, even 30. I counted how many women were in a room the second I entered. Twenty-nine men, three women. Sixty-three men, two women. Forty-four men, one woman: me.

I wore my hair in a tight braid. I didn't wear shorts. I wore shoes that hid my toes. I put on sweaters in 117-degree heat. Even so, my body was everywhere.

My eyes met the other women's when we passed in the hall, when I threw my trash away at the DFAC, when I was buzzed through the guard stations. *How are you? Are you okay? Are we safe?*

THE MEN GOSSIPED about us; we'd meet them in a professional capacity and find that they already knew our hometowns, our alma maters, our marital status.

They openly made bets about who was going to get pregnant, who was going to get an STD. We overheard conversations we wished we hadn't—like after my first briefing of the admiral, when one analyst in my office observed to another, "I think she'll do well," and the other answered, "Just another woman trying to use her body to get ahead." Or the four contractors who didn't see me reading in a chair behind them as they watched a female translator for the State Department:

"Fuck, look at that."

"Is she seeing anyone?"

"Not since they sent that old bird home."

"Well, that ass has got to be fucked."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Riverside 242."

WE WORKED 14-, 16-, 18-hour days. We put in as many hours as the men—we made sure of this. Women who'd been

I counted how many women were in a room the second I entered: 63 men, two women; 44 men, one woman. Me.

there longer offered advice: *Be sure to engage with them*, we were told. *Don't get too close*, we were warned. Say *Yes, sir*. Do not ever say *Yes, sir*.

Some of us were married, had kids back home. One of us was quietly going through a divorce. Theresa had deployed to Iraq with her mother, also a soldier, while Ann had come with her husband, who, like her, was a staff sergeant. When we sat together in the DFAC, talking, he'd sit a few tables behind, drinking coffee, her lookout. They lived together in a married trailer and held hands while lying on the floor during shellings. Some of us were looking to date. Others couldn't be bothered with men. A number of us were virgins.

During my breaks, I'd lie on a gold couch in the main palace entryway, which was usually empty because the side entrances were safer. I'd run my fingers over the gilt of Saddam's chairs and along the smooth marble railings. I'd stare at

the gorgeous geometric patterns of the ceiling until images emerged. My mother's favorite blue dress. The sun striking the Potomac River, where we used to swim. My own eyes and breasts and legs and feet, misshapen and rearranged like in a cubist painting.

I WAS LUCKY. Rear Admiral Smith made it known from his first day in theater that he'd personally punish any sex offenders. This made a difference, I think. A colonel from Psychological Operations once propositioned me on behalf of his son—*Honey, with him you'll be breathing twice as hard*. In the office, though, I was fairly safe. The only sexual slurs came from a fellow analyst who had a habit of calling me "Twat." But I'd lived such a sheltered life that I didn't know what the word meant, so I wasn't bothered by it.

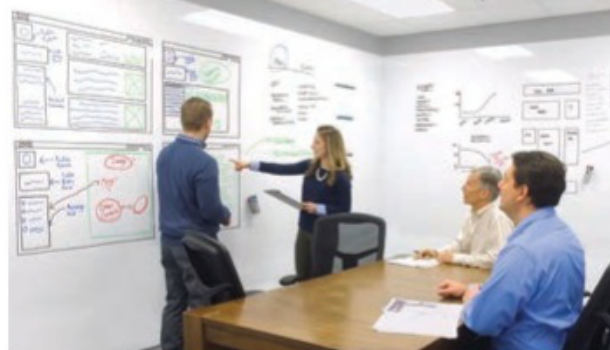
My job was to inform the admiral of the most "strategic" events that occurred in Baghdad on a given day—incidents that would affect our operations, the stability of the Iraqi government, or our highest-priority alliances. Each evening, I chose six events to highlight.

Not long after my arrival, a translator, Nazir (a pseudonym), reached out to provide guidance. I'd passed the exams that tested regional knowledge and the ability to respond to hypothetical foreign-policy and security challenges, but I was the only analyst without a master's degree. Nazir helped me keep track of the latest faction to boycott the prime minister and which new militia was splintering off from the last new militia. He'd find important events for me before they were reported anywhere in English, allowing me to give the admiral the most up-to-the-minute information. He was funny and took me to social gatherings with Iraqi nationals that, as a non-Middle Easterner, I wouldn't have had access to. Those first weeks, I don't know what I would have done without him.

On a mortar-free day roughly a month into my deployment, I sat outside the palace. The air was like the inside of a hair dryer. A squad of soldiers jogged around the T-walls, the 12-foot slabs of reinforced concrete lining the embassy compound. After they went by, I saw Nazir and waved.

"Do you want to smoke?" he asked.

I didn't smoke but appreciated the invitation. "Sure, Nazir. Thanks." We walked to a picnic table, passing a



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roped-off section of dirt with a sign in bold letters: DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS. We laughed.

He lit a cigarette for me, which I held awkwardly. "You look tired," he said. I shrugged. Three soldiers passed our table; the shortest one blew me a kiss. "You seem to have caught their attention," Nazir said.

"They wouldn't be so hot for me if they knew how clueless I am." I looked at the sand and thought of another soldier far away.

Nazir's eyebrows rose. "You've never had a boyfriend?"

"Not really," I admitted. I didn't think what I had qualified as a boyfriend. I'd spent the past two years in love—a love consummated, at this point, exclusively via email—with an Israeli soldier 700 miles away whom I'd met on an academic fellowship in Israel.

"Do you mean to tell me," Nazir said, "that you're a virgin?"

I mumbled something, then decided to ignore the question. Nazir chuckled. He took a long pull on his cigarette.

What would possess me to provide such an intimate detail? Now I can recognize my extreme loneliness in a place where men looked at me and tried to attract my notice, but rarely spoke to me as a friend. I also see my naïveté. I never imagined that a man old enough to be my father, a highly respected professional whose knowledge and experience far eclipsed mine, could be interested in me.

Nazir put his arm gently around my shoulder. "How about we change that, dear?"

THANK GOD FOR MORGAN. Practically overnight, we became as close as sisters. I was also good friends with Theresa and Nicole, but they weren't around as much. I could almost always find Morgan to walk with. A public-affairs officer for the State Department, she'd deal with journalists while I briefed the admiral, and then we'd find a corner somewhere to talk.

One day, Morgan was a bit quiet at lunch. I asked her why, and she blushed. A half-empty bottle of sexual lubricant had been left on her desk, and her colleagues had watched, laughing, as she found it.

We women drank. We picked up smoking. We flirted and slept with several men or, like me, hunched our shoulders

and stayed out of their way as much as possible. Some of us loved Baghdad, no one more than Nicole, the doctoral student. She swore as well as the men and had jaw-length red hair so thick, it looked like a crash helmet. She barely seemed to notice the lack of women.

We desperately missed our families. I'd think of my 10-year-old brother, who was still into Pokémon cards. (Secretly, I was too.) We dreamed of home. For me, it was the leafy college campus filled with women I'd left only weeks before. For Morgan, her twin brother, who was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan. Theresa dreamed of her two little boys; she feared they wouldn't know her when she returned home.

THERE WERE WOMEN who, like Silvana, reported their male bosses for sexual harassment. But I worked for a man as decent as he was powerful. A man who listened to me in the briefings, who sought out my opinion in a room full of majors and colonels. And when the security situation deteriorated, and the mortars and rockets began hitting the palace

with frightening accuracy, he refused to allow me to accompany him to the broadcast room, because the hallway had floor-to-ceiling windows.

Three months into my deployment, Silvana vanished. She just stopped

**We had fun, too.
We slid down the marble
railings of the palace.
We flew over blue pools
surrounded by sand
and could hardly breathe
at their beauty.**

coming to work, no word to any of us. I emailed her, called her cell. We asked around, but no one knew.

"Bet she broke her contract," Morgan said. "She's probably home."

"Good for her," Theresa said. "Who could work for that creep?"

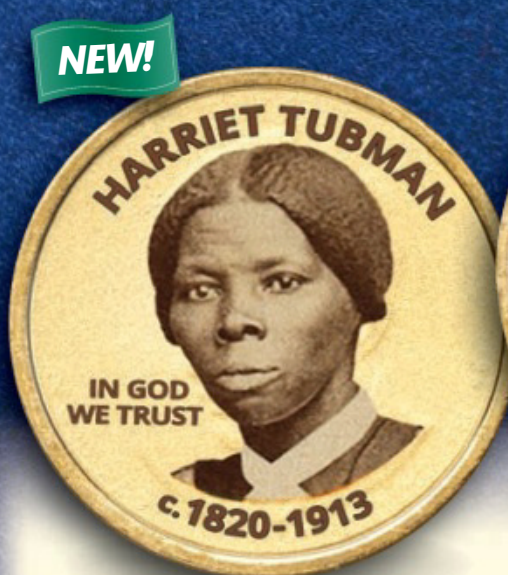
"I hope he gets AIDS," the Naval Academy graduate said, massaging her shins.

We discussed how to respond to Iranian encroachment in Basra. "That's easy," Nicole cracked. She moved a chunk of red hair from one side of her face to the other. "Tell them to watch it, or we'll fuck up Iran the same way we fucked up Iraq."

Genius! We laughed.

I wish I could say that we were more curious about what was going on in Silvana's office, but we didn't have any way to speak about our vulnerability in an environment that placed a premium on female toughness and resourcefulness. I didn't tell the others, not even Morgan, how the same day Silvana disappeared, Nazir had put his hand on my neck and whispered, "Have you thought about my question?" It's not that we didn't care about Silvana—we did—but we also wanted to be in Baghdad. We wanted it badly. We feared the noise coming from her corner would show as lie the truth we most valued: *I belong here. Women belong here.*

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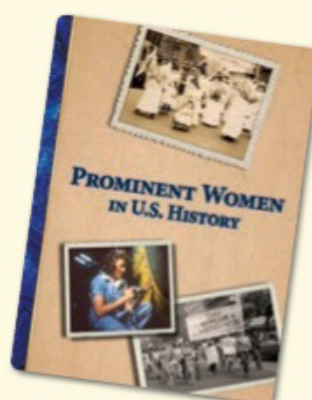
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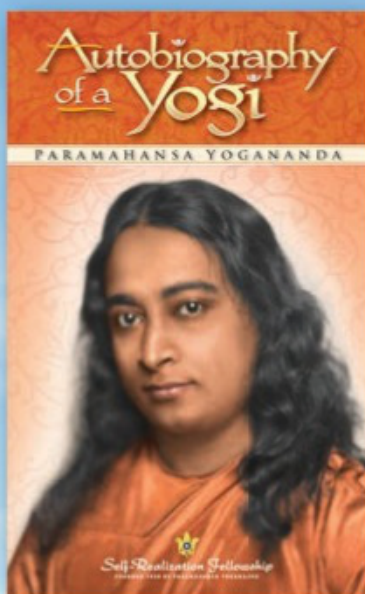
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WE HAD FUN, TOO. We slid down the marble railings of the palace when no one was looking. Hanging out in Saddam's golden chairs, we ate tangy, Army-issued granola bars, which actually weren't bad. We used Morgan's State Department status—she had the longest leash of any of us—to get our names on a helicopter transport and flew over blue pools surrounded by sand and could hardly breathe at their beauty. We got drunk at Italian-embassy functions and marveled at the authority we'd been given to broker deals, transport top-secret government papers, and shape policy decisions for America's generals.

Morgan started an all-female Bible study. I can't say my faith was thriving in Baghdad, but I never missed a meeting. Oh, the joy and freedom of being a woman among women, of letting my guard down. It was additional relief to be around Morgan, because she was fearless. She would run the perimeter, where most of us were too afraid to go by ourselves. She would swim—actually be seen in a swimsuit by dozens of drooling men—in Saddam's pool. She formed a soccer team with Italian-army guys. "They don't care that I'm the only girl," Morgan said, "and they never go easy on me, either."

It wasn't long, however, before posters were plastered around the embassy with a photo of Morgan's five teammates and a description—in English and Italian—of all the things a certain unidentified female soccer player would do to them, one-on-one or all together. "There was no one else they could have been describing but me," Morgan said grimly.

To be close to any man, no matter how platonic the association, was to have your reputation questioned. The five guys ran around the base and tore down every poster.

THERE WAS A young marine who worked at one of the palace's side entry points, and whenever he manned the booth it took me three times as long to be screened. I didn't know if he didn't understand how to work the buzzer or just liked to be in my company, but I didn't mind. He looked like my little brother: stiff blond hair, smooth face, crooked nose. Every Tuesday and Thursday, we'd peer at each other through two-inch-thick, bulletproof yellow glass.

I remember one of these interactions in particular. I held up my badge. He fumbled with the buzzer and then it sounded,

but the door didn't open; he must have released the button too soon. Through the glass, I heard him clear his throat. There was a pause, some shuffling, and a sound like something falling off a desk. A muffled curse. I fought a smile.

After I'd finally made it through, I turned toward him and smiled, because he was awkward, because he looked like my brother, because there was thick glass between us, or because I was so tired of

A female soldier told me she'd slept with most of the men in her squad. "I guess I don't really know how not to," she said. "They keep me alive."

not smiling. For a moment he simply looked at me, then nodded, like I was his superior. In his eyes there was gratitude and respect.

"I KNOW ALL the spots," Nazir whispered, leaning over my desk, his hand on my shoulder. A male co-worker—the same one who'd said I was trying to use my body to get ahead—fed a folder into the shredder, looking at me with disgust. He was convinced I'd pursued Nazir.

I'd wake to the siren; I'd wake to the call to prayer. I'd wake to throwing myself on the floor as mortar rounds crashed down around me. "You know I'm a very determined man," Nazir said. I read reports about sectarian protests and Sunni marginalization. "I think I've been very patient," Nazir said. I read reports about kidnappings and IEDs. "You're so selfish," Nazir said.

"Please stop," I told Nazir, but never anything more. I had almost no knowledge then of what constituted sexual harassment, never mind that it was illegal.

I was also keenly aware of the importance of Nazir's work. He'd often catch videos on Arab channels of U.S. military convoys being blown up by IEDs, videos that everyone knew fueled the influx of foreign fighters. Thanks to Nazir's

detection, they could swiftly be taken off the air, saving American lives.

I'd call the faraway soldier I loved and tell him nothing about the harassment. I wanted so badly to tell him, but he was in combat, and I worried that any additional stress would compromise his safety. My silence was a way of protecting him from the knowledge that he could do nothing to protect me.

MOST TIMES I SAW NAZIR, he asked for sex. But in the briefings with the admiral, a translator wasn't necessary, and there I grew strong. I was creative, adaptive; I was correct. The admiral requested my work regularly. I was assigned to write a high-profile section of the Battlefield Update Assessment, which was sent to General Petraeus, the Pentagon, and the White House every morning. A paper I wrote was recommended by the Defense Intelligence Agency as required reading for all incoming personnel. One day, I asked the co-worker who called me "Twat" what the word meant. His face flushing, he haltingly explained, and never called me that again. Four months

into my deployment, Morgan got a cook to make a cake for my 22nd birthday. General Petraeus called to tell me I had written *diffuse* instead of *defuse* in the Battlefield Update Assessment. He joked about it; he was kind. It snowed in Baghdad for the first time in living memory, and we ran outside to see thin white flakes falling on sand, and I thought it was possible that this was where I was supposed to be.

I'd begun ad hoc humanitarian visits to Iraqi families around Baghdad, and the admiral volunteered to join me. While many flag officers considered this an unnecessary security risk, he rarely missed a trip. "I can't wait for the runs out to the families on Thursday," the admiral said after the briefing one day. "My wife made a quilt for Sabine and the kids."

Thinking of this moment now, I feel sad, because I almost told him about Nazir then, and I could have. He surely would have helped, but I was too shy, too embarrassed to say words like *proposition* and *sex* and *help me*.

SEVEN MONTHS INTO my deployment, I hadn't seen Theresa for four days.

I asked the marines at the door if they knew where she was, and they told me to check the front gardens, which sounded strange, because no one would be so reckless as to go there in the middle of the day. Yet when I arrived, I saw her brown bun peeking out from inside the dry fountain.

I trotted over to her, about to make a fuss about being out there in daylight and rush us both inside, but I quickly realized that if we sat inside the fountain, we were protected from shrapnel on four sides. Only a direct hit would kill us, which seemed like good enough odds.

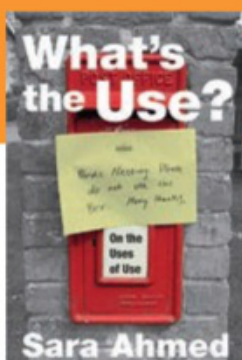
The fountain was strangely magnificent. Giant stone fish leaped from nonexistent water. I climbed in beside the fish, but Theresa didn't look at me. I sat next to her and nudged her with my shoulder. She sort of smiled.

"Where you been?" I asked.

"I was at karaoke night," she said quietly. I laughed. "For four days?"

"But there was no one to walk home with." Her voice was hoarse as she told me she'd seen and spoken with him, the guard, many times before, though never alone. She said "Good evening," as she

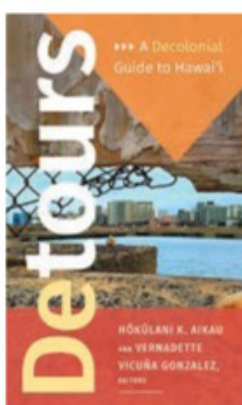
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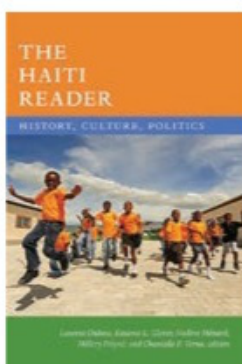
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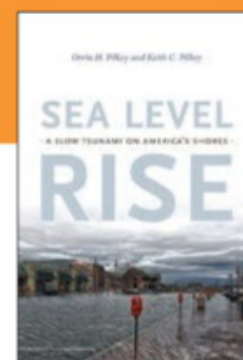
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always did when she entered her trailer compound. “He held out his hand and smiled, like for me to shake it,” Theresa said, and that’s when the guard yanked her toward him and forcibly kissed her. “I twisted away from him. I just kept trying to twist away, looking to see if anyone was around. Anybody.”

I took her hand. It was so small.

The guard grabbed Theresa by the hair, and she kept saying, “I have to go. I need to go.” Theresa told me her thoughts ran on a loop as he dragged her. *I’m going to be raped. Is this cheating on my husband? Why is this happening to me?* When he released his grip to undo her jacket, she ran. “The whole time, running, I thought he was going to shoot me in the back,” Theresa said.

We watched a brown bird land on the opposite side of the fountain. “Even my mother’s been assaulted, you know.” She sat quietly for a moment before adding, “Several times.”

“Theresa, can I do something? Help you report—”

“I did. I just—” She shook her head. “I didn’t react how I thought I would. I thought I’d be ...”

Theresa was furious with herself that she hadn’t fought back. Despite her training, she’d frozen in fear. And she was upset that she’d lied in her report. She’d provided the location and unit of the soldier who tried to assault her but claimed not to have seen his face because she’d forgotten her glasses. Theresa knew exactly who he was. She lied because he was armed and lived only a few trailers away from hers—how might he retaliate if she named him? She hoped the other soldiers in his unit would identify him, because there had been only one guard on post at the time. They didn’t.

THERE WERE other stories. Stories of supervisors using their trailer keys to enter female subordinates’ rooms, stories of gang rape. There was the American translator, a civilian who worked down the hall from me, who whispered, “I came here a confident person.” And the enlisted soldier, the only female in her squad, who sat across from me one afternoon in the DFAC, having just come in from outside the wire. Her sunburned face was peeling as she said, lightly, that she’d slept with most of the men in her squad. When I smiled awkwardly and asked if she had wanted to, she said, “I guess I don’t really know how not to. They keep me alive.”

She looked toward the other end of the cafeteria, where her squad sat eating. One of the soldiers caught her eye and waved amiably. She turned back to me. “You know, sometimes I feel like a piece of dirt, blowing in whichever direction anyone chooses.”

And there was Theresa’s rage and guilt when the guard who assaulted her assaulted another female soldier only weeks later.

NOT LONG AFTER Theresa and I talked in the fountain, she and Ann completed their deployments. Morgan, Nicole, and I watched them preparing to depart in armored buses called Rhinos. Standing together, saluting stiffly, they looked beautiful, and we were proud of

The number of sexual assaults in the military has risen, with 20,500 in 2018.

them. I started to cry, thinking I’d never see them again. Nicole turned to comfort me. “Go back to the palace. Walk those halls as a lion,” she said.

In Morgan’s trailer a few weeks later, we struggled to open a bottle of wine without a corkscrew so that we could break the rule against drinking. “I don’t have cups,” Morgan said, when the cork finally yielded to a combination of a knife and a screwdriver. “We’ll just have to take it straight from the bottle,” Nicole said.

We lay in Morgan’s bed, and she started talking about her brother, a helicopter pilot, but she wasn’t saying her words right. “You’re drunk,” we teased, and then she started saying she couldn’t feel her limbs and her tongue was swollen and she couldn’t breathe, and we were calling an ambulance.

Morgan was medevaced to London, where it was discovered that she’d suffered a flare-up of a rare autoimmune syndrome. A week later, when we spoke on the phone, she said, “I’m so worried about you all. I’ll be back soon.” My voice was stern, mean even, when I replied, “Morgan, don’t ever come back here,” and hung up.

I’D BEEN IN IRAQ eight months when the Sadr City cease-fire began to fall apart, in March 2008. Rockets rained into the embassy compound. The mortars and sniper fire were so accurate that we took to wearing our flak vests inside buildings.

At night in my trailer, the aluminum ceiling above my bed shone like a bullet. I imagined the roof peeling back like wrapping paper, my body sprayed on the walls. I slept a few hours a night, less. Everyone looked terrible, unshaven, white-faced. I walked slowly down the hallway, dragging my hand along the red mosaic of the wall. My shirt was untucked. My hair hung around my shoulders, long and oily.

When rockets took out several trailers and a prominent financial analyst in the embassy was killed, we were required to remain inside the palace at all times. I briefed on the same bombings in the same markets day in, day out, and then tried to find a place in the palace to put my cot, though the siren rarely shut up long enough for us to sleep for more than 20 minutes at a time. In the open areas, men were everywhere, dozens of hungry eyes. I’d set up my cot in the DFAC or a hallway and lie there watching every boot that passed, looking and not looking at every face. I lived in fear that Nazir would discover me while I slept.

I’d heard that the theater in the basement was safe and that the siren was muted. So one evening I waited until the basement hallway was clear, pulled my hoodie over my head, and walked quickly inside. In the pitch-black room, I could see nothing, but instantly I heard a chorus of snoring. Did I breathe like a woman?

I made my way forward, my shins bumping into soft bodies and metal frames. I almost forgot myself and said “Excuse me.” I set up my cot in the dark and lay down. I was so tired. I heard the man beside me snoring, slow and gentle. I rolled over and my hand fell off the cot onto his. The frame of his cot was warm from his body. I drew back quickly and stuffed my hands into my hoodie, but sometime during the night I reached out and touched the warm metal again.

This went on for weeks. Every night I looked for somewhere, anywhere, I could sleep alone or at least with another woman. Eventually I wandered into one of Saddam’s conference rooms. It had two massive floor-to-ceiling windows. One mortar and anyone in the room would be vapor. *The men would be mad to choose this*

place, I thought. I dragged my cot in there and slept for the first long stretch in days.

A FEW DAYS into the ban on going outside, I decided to violate orders and go to the post-office trailer to send my family a letter. We'd been discouraged from mentioning via email or phone how dire the situation in the embassy compound really was, but I was desperate to communicate with my parents. Or maybe I just got lazy. It's tiring, trying to stay alive all the time. I put on full gear and helmet and waited for lunchtime, when mortars were fewer. Running, I could make the trip in less than five minutes.

I stood by the door for a moment, and when I heard nothing, I pushed outside, jogging toward the post office. And then the sirens blared. "Incoming!"

The next thing I knew, I was facedown in the gravel at the foot of the post-office stairs. *I'm so stupid. How could I have done this to my family? Don't let me die. Don't let me die.*

The earth isn't hard like we think it is. It snaps like a rubber band. The first mortar landed. The second one lifted me off the ground. I crawled to the nearest T-wall, a few feet away. I didn't hear the third impact at all; I only felt air heavy as water roll over me.

"Are you hit?"

I opened my eyes. The marine with the crooked nose from the other side of the yellow glass—he must have seen me leave the palace. His mouth moved again. The roar was so loud.

"Are you hit?"

"No," I whispered. He picked me up by my vest with one hand. I swayed to the left, and he caught me in his arms. Another crash near the pool. He spun me so that I faced the palace and shoved me hard. *Go!* Then he ran toward the mortar rounds in search of more casualties. *Toward* them. I thought how brave that man was. How were we supposed to report one of these guys? Maybe the soldier who harassed or even molested you didn't save your life, but what about someone else's? Do you report a man who is mission-critical?

Back at the palace, I sat in my office, still in full gear and helmet. I didn't remember walking there. Commander Scott Rye was speaking to me. *What's wrong? Why are you wearing your helmet?* I'd been knocked briefly unconscious by the blast, and I'd be diagnosed with a concussion. He helped me up and half-carried me to the palace infirmary.

"I'm sorry I'm like this," I mumbled. The infirmary was full, so we waited in the hall. I was leaning on him and then lying in his lap, which embarrassed me, and I apologized again. Commander Rye was a reserved, professional man. We had rarely spoken, but that afternoon he wiped the layer of dust and sand from my face, patted my head, tried to soothe me.

"I can't sleep here," I mumbled. Men, men everywhere.

"Sure you can."

I must have trusted him. I did sleep.

IT WASN'T an easy decision, but I gave my two weeks' notice several days after the mortar attack that picked me up and dropped me near the post-office stairs. It is miraculous that nothing worse happened to me other than being very scared. Ann, with her bodyguard husband, made it to the end relatively unscathed and started her goat farm. Morgan recovered in London and returned to Baghdad after I left. Once she returned home, Theresa became pregnant with her third child and retired from the military, which she'd always miss. The Naval Academy graduate recovered from her shin splints and became a lieutenant commander. And Nicole, with her wild red hair, who liked to announce her arrival in the dining hall with a coffee cup slammed on the table and the words *Iraq's had a real ass-kicking this month*, Nicole who loved Baghdad—she was blown up in a municipal building in Sadr City. The bomb had been placed for the Iraqi politicians she was meeting. In one of the last emails she sent, she wrote, "I love this job!"

IN 2008, the Pentagon ramped up efforts to prevent sexual assault and make offenders more accountable. Since

then there has been a substantial drop in incidents: from approximately 34,200 in 2006 to 14,900 in 2016, based on a confidential survey. Yet recent data suggest that the number has risen, with 20,500 victims of sexual assault in 2018. It's hard to know exactly what to make of this, but one finding is particularly surprising: Despite the #MeToo movement, service members were somewhat less likely to report an assault in 2018 than they were in 2016, based on comparing figures in the confidential survey with reported incidents.

Sometimes I wonder if it's the nature of warfare itself that is to blame for the persistence of sexual abuse in the military. We ask men to do violence in service to the state, to be paragons of hypermasculinity. Can we simultaneously ask them to change the way they perform masculinity toward women? Can we ask them to make safe spaces for women in war?

But Rear Admiral Smith treated women with respect, treated us simply as colleagues united in a common mission. Commander Rye did too. The men of the Italian Personal Security Detail did too. As do thousands of soldiers performing their duty honorably under great stress.

In a photograph of me taken during this time, my face is nearly transparent from lack of sunlight, deep blues and purples framing my eyes. When I look at that photograph, I remember a 21-year-old woman learning how to make strategic battlefield assessments about where to sleep, what to wear, how to engage with male co-workers without risking sexual assault. I lasted about a year in Iraq. I don't know whether I could have lasted longer. Maybe I could have withstood the pressures of IEDs and mortars and stray fire over the Tigris and a workload more appropriate for three analysts if not for the less explicable, less tangible pressure of the ratio: too many men paying too much attention. 

Sandra Sidi teaches at Texas State University and is working on a novel about Israeli soldiers.

Q:

What is the most significant sports victory of all time?

Tommy Tomlinson, sports journalist and author, *The Elephant in the Room*

The 1926 Rose Bowl:

Alabama 20, Washington 19. There was a time when the South wasn't good at college football. This upset win gave the region a post-Civil War identity. Southern schools grew to have the best teams, the biggest stadiums, the deepest rivalries. Credit (or blame, if you prefer) that one game 93 years ago.



Roberto González Echevarría, author, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball*

Two come to mind: the U.S. ice-hockey victory over the Soviet team in 1980 (the "Miracle on Ice"), and Muhammad Ali's knock-out of George Foreman at

the "Rumble in the Jungle," in 1974. The American hockey team was amateur, the Russian one much less so, and Ali, with his opposition to the Vietnam War and brazen declaration that black is beautiful, represented a new spirit in the culture emerging in the '60s.

J. A. Adande, director of sports journalism, Northwestern University, and panelist, ESPN's *Around the Horn*

There was a moment at the end of Texas Western's victory over Kentucky in the 1966 NCAA men's-basketball championship game when it wasn't just a sporting event; it was a chapter in the civil-rights movement. For the first time, a basketball team with an all-black starting lineup won the title over an all-white team. In a picture captured by the photographer Rich Clarkson, the faces of the Kentucky players and coaches show a recognition of an irreversible change.

READER RESPONSES
Michael Mims, Clanton, Ala.
Jesse Owens's four gold medals at the 1936 Olym-



pic Games in Berlin. A black American's victory humiliated Adolf Hitler and produced a dark reaction from American society. Owens was not invited to the White House to meet President Franklin D. Roosevelt for recognition of his accomplishments, nor was he allowed to go through the main entrance of the Waldorf-Astoria to attend a gathering in his honor.



Michael Clemmons, Philadelphia, Pa.
Tommie Smith and John Carlos coming in first and third in the 200-meter race at the 1968 Olympics. It enabled their iconic Black Power protest, derailed their lives, created a national controversy, and inspired more people than any other 20 seconds in sports history.

Glenn Huberman, Miami, Fla.

The Major League debut of Jackie Robinson, on April 15, 1947, with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He broke baseball's color barrier, and after tolerating racist taunts throughout his career, he was enshrined in the Hall of Fame in 1962.

Frank D. Rugienius, Philadelphia, Pa.

The New York Jets' Joe Namath guaranteed an upset victory over the Baltimore Colts in **Super Bowl III**, in 1969; the Jets delivered. This game set the stage for the National Football League to become the dominant sports organization in the United States.

Adriana Delia Collins, San Francisco, Calif.

Passing Title IX in 1972, which prohibited sex discrimination in any education program, including sports, that receives federal aid.

David Drexler, Wilmington, Del.

The upset victory of the South Africa Springboks over the New Zealand All Blacks in **the 1995 Rugby World Cup final.** It provided the glue that held a newly united country together.

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